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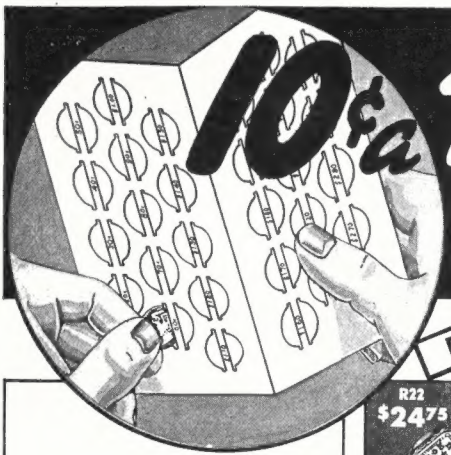

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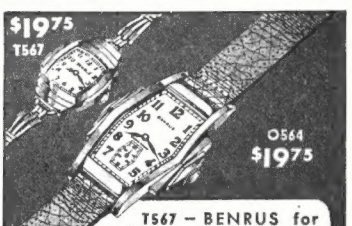

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Sioux war drums were beating their challenge to America's emigrant invasion, and only Telegrapher Print Christian could avert an Indian slaughter house hoe-down for the pioneers who wouldn't quit—and he had been condemned to renegade death!

Two Dynamic Frontier Novelettes

GUNMAN'S HOLIDAY . . . . . John G. Pearsol **44**
Drunkard Bud Brandon failed when he tried to build himself back to manhood on the bones and fortunes of broken nester pards. But then he took the last chance for victory that God gives every man—and his name went down forever on Boothill's honor roll!

THE GREAT HORSETHIEF SYNDICATE. J. E. Grinstead **76**
Men hung from most every tree on that wagon road of the damned, but Mark Wendell vowed he'd ride the trail until every horse-stealing hellion in Cross Timbers country paid in full—or knot a vigilante hangman's noose about his own misbegotten neck!

Five Smashing Short Stories

OVER THE HILL WITH DEATH . . . . . Fred Gipson **35**
Little did fugitive Ringo think that when he came to a showdown with two double-dealing friends, he'd be glad to see a lawman—even though it meant ten years in the pen!

BOOK LEARNIN' FOR A TOWN-TAMER . . Bill Gulick **59**
Only one thing could stop make-believe school master Jonathan Wesley from taming the tough hombres of Valley's End—a fifth grade spelling bee!

EQUALIZER FROM DEER LODGE . . . . . Lee Florin **68**
Jim Sterling left Deer Lodge Prison to square a gun account, knowing full well that success would mean the pen for life; failure—a cheap pine box!

HE WHO LIVES BY THE GUN . . . . . Mack Martin **89**
Bad Boy Travis was hard as hell, but a graybeard executioner taught him that life was worth living by delivering a gunster's prayer—at the brink of a barroom grave!

SATAN'S TWO-FACED GUNMAN . C. D. Richardson, Jr. **95**
What would range looter Jeff Pressley do when the outlaw combine that owned his soul ordered him to pillage his own father's home?

Ace-High Feature

OUT-TRAIL CARAVAN . . . . . The Editor **6**
In which a top-hand Idaho roper rides his riata to glory . . .

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Out-Trail Caravan

THE old-timer was in a talkative frame of mind, over his third glass of beer. With him, at the table, were an editor and an artist. The editor had a pile of manuscripts waiting to be read, back at the office, and the artist had a cover to paint. But when the old-timer started telling one of his stories, no one could be blamed for ordering another round.

"Speaking of roping," he began, "I still claim that Buck Lathrop, top-hand on the old Diamond R in Idaho in the '80's, was the best of the lot." We hadn't been speaking of roping, but that was all right.

"Course you hear tell, every so often, about some buckaroo that has roped a wildcat or a grizzly bear or a buzzard, an' I ain't the one to belittle such exploits. But I'm here to state that that big black-haired six-footer, Buck Lathrop, coulda matched them all, with rope to spare. Even you"—he scowls at the editor—"could cast a loop around a bear or buzzard or a wildcat, with a little luck, if you was in the right position for a down throw."

"Not me," states the editor. "No thanks."

"It's a question of nerve," the old-timer points out. "An' that's what Buck didn't have nothin' else but. Take the time Old Man Reynolds' tomboy daughter got herself kidnaped while the Diamond R crew was closin' in for the kill on the Hell's Pocket owlhoot gang. They'd run off a goodly number of old Reynolds' cows, an' the boys had followed an' trapped 'em at the head of Rocky Creek Canyon. It was just a matter of time before the bandits would be starved out or shot out an' brought to justice, like the book says.

"Then word comes that Honey, the misnamed little bundle of saucy femininity that Old Man Reynolds has spawned, has been taken prisoner by some stray hard-cases from Hell's Pocket, an' is bein' held as hostage. The idea is that if Reynolds don't call off his dogs, an' leave the besieged rustlers to the peaceful performance of their day's work, Honey will get the spanking she deserves—or worse.

"Except for Old Man Reynolds, the Diamond R, to a man, woulda been in favor of her getting a good sound thrashing, I reckon. But not from a gang of blackguards that might not know when to stop. An' we didn't none of us hanker to have her sent back in little pieces.

"Along with the note tellin' about Honey, which was delivered by a half-breed nester's boy that didn't have no part in the proceedings, there come a cocky little white Stetson that everybody knew belonged to Honey. Just to prove that the abduction was on the level. There wasn't no mention in the note, of course, as to where they was keepin' Honey.

"Buck Lathrop, he was standin' alongside the old man, an' he took the white sombrero, turnin' it round an' round in his hands and starin' at it. I felt pretty sorry for him, as everybody knew he was mighty fond of Honey. Then, of a sudden, the dazed look went out of his face. He had seen a piece of cardboard inside the crown, almost hidden under the sweat band, and had pulled it out.

" 'If you got anything you don't want stole,' he read, 'leave it at the desk downstairs. We got a two-ton safe.' " Buck snapped his fingers and said, 'You fellers stay here. I'll get her back for you, safe an' sound, don't you worry.'

"He pointed out to Old Man Reynolds how that little piece of cardboard meant that the desperadoes had Honey at the Grand Palace Hotel, in Gardiner's Hole, only ten miles away—and that she was the smartest girl west of the Mississippi for thinking to slip the card in under her sweat band—and that she was a good as rescued already.

"The old man picked out three or four of us to go along, and we rid like blazes for Gardiner's Hole. For all my private feelings about Honey, I was glad to be goin' along, as this sorta thing had to be put a stop to.

"We had just reined up in front of the Grand Palace Hotel, the only three-story building in that part of Idaho, when a rifle slammed out a bullet from the saloon porch, down a few doors. Old Man Reynolds' hat jumped off his head an' he yelled, 'There's one o' the blackguards!'

(Concluded on page 8)

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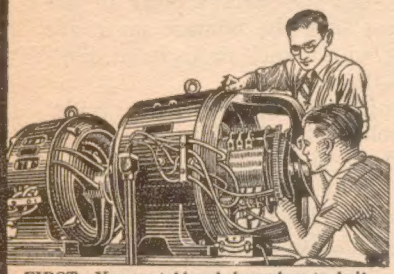

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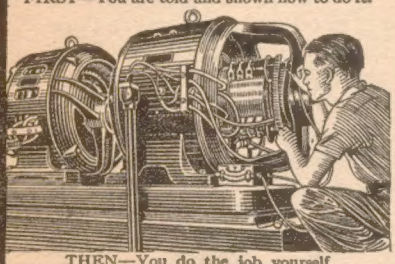

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(Continued from page 6)

He dug in the spurs, an' the rest of us followed, for at that minute a couple more owlhoot-lookin' hombres come pyrutin' out from the saloon with guns bangin'.

"There was a flurry of excitement for a while, with bullets whistlin' through the air, an' no one noticed that big Buck Lathrop had dropped out of the battle line. Then I glanced back, through the smoke, an' saw the big son of a gun on the porch roof of a store next to the hotel, blazing away at a couple of hombres that was forted up at the hotel door.

"What Buck Lathrop was up to, was beyond me—till I seen him reachin' up with his free hand an' catchin' a hold of the main roof. He hauled himself up, out of range of the hotel hellions. Then I look beyond him an' see a girl's scared face in a third-story window of the hotel. So I begin to get an inklin' of what has driven him so crazy. But how he's goin' to reach her is more than I can see.

"Then I see him shake out the riata that he's totin', an' build his loop for a swing. What he's goin' to snag from that angle, I dunno, unless maybe he hopes to haul his horse up after him. Meanwhile, the hotel hellions swarm out into the street an' start pepperin' him again. He fires back an' wings one. The other, I account for myself with a lucky shot.

"Calm as you please, Buck goes ahead buildin' his loop. Then he has it swingin' out over his head. Just about then, there's a new burst of gunfire, an' I see that one of them kidnaping killers has clumb up to the roof an' is lettin' Buck have it. Buck pays no never mind. He's on a ropin' job.

"He lets fly the loop, an' it goes up an' up. I never seen a rope climb walls before, not walls like that. Thirty feet, it must have been, from where he was standin' to the top of the chimney that he was aimin' at. Castin' a loop straight out, or on a downslope, is one thing, at thirty feet; but throwin' straight up is a feat I hope never to witness again—not under such dangerous circumstances.

"With lead slugs rippin' through his clothing and singin' about his ears, he plays out the rope. Up through the powdersmoke an' into the clouds sails the loop—an' settles over the big square smokestack.

"Without a second thought, Buck flips the slack rope over the buildin's front and launches himself out into midair, hangin' onto the anchored rope with one hand. He's got the free end looped around his body so he can ride it like a swing. In his free hand he holds his gun, an' he's lookin' up for that hombre on the roof to show himself.

"Buck works his way over to the girl's window, with his feet braced against the side of the wall like he was walkin' on solid ground. He throws his free arm around her, an' she swings clear of the window. Just then the hombre up above shows again, with a knife in his hand. He's goin' to cut the rope.

"You could almost hear Buck tellin' the girl to hold on for dear life. She grabs him around the waist, freein' his gun-hand. Her hold slips, an' then she is grabbin' his belt. Buck slams a shot up at the hombre with the knife, an' there's the look of hell an' damnation on his face.

"The shot is good, an' the hombre flops back. It's inch by inch, then, as Buck works his way down the rope, down to the street, where the rest of us are waitin' to catch 'em if they fall. For the other outlaws have been permanently subdued by then. But they don't fall. They take it as calmly as a couple of moon-struck calves. The only thing that's the least bit out of the ordinary is the way Buck gathers Honey into his arms, right there in front of her mossy-horned old pappy, and kisses her right square on the mouth. An' Old Man Reynolds don't say a thing."

The old-timer called for another beer, shaking his head in fond remembrance. "That's ropin', I call it."

"And," said the artist, "that's giving a hard-working painter the idea he needs for the *Ace-High* cover."

So, as a result, this month's cover is dedicated to Buck Lathrop, who now runs his own ranch and who, in the old-timer's opinion, is the best danged roper in the world. Buck's along in years now, but still can stand up against the best of them, according to the old-timer. And, in spite of the old-timer's early opinion of Honey, he'd knock the teeth out of any gent who said a disrespectful word about her now—since she became Mrs. Buck Lathrop.

—THE EDITOR.

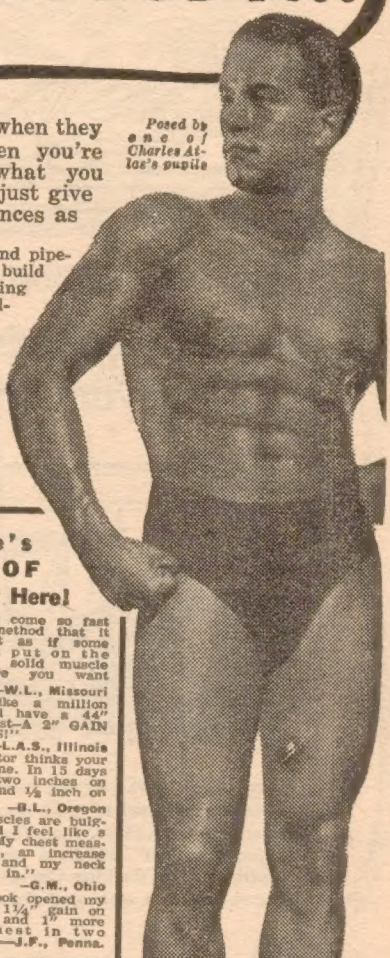
Don't Look Now!

but if you want to see a real

HE-MAN BODY...

WHAT do people say about YOU when they see you on the beach? When you're stripped to the waist you show what you REALLY are—a HE-MAN or a weakling! Do the girl's eyes just give you the silent "ha-ha"? Or can you FEEL their admiring glances as you strut along?

And don't think that clothes can cover up a flat chest, skinny arms, and pipe-stem legs EITHER! People KNOW at a glance when a man's got a puny build like Caspar Milquetoast—or when his whole personality glows with smashing strength, rippling muscles, tireless pep and energy! You CAN'T down a fellow like that—he's BOUND to be popular and the life of the party wherever he goes! Do YOU want to be that kind of a man? Then listen to THIS—



Posed by one of Charles Atlas's pupils

In Just 15 Minutes a Day, I'll Prove I Can Make YOU a New Man Too!

Charles Atlas

That's what I said—15 minutes a day! That's all the time I need to PROVE—regardless of how old or young you are, or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be—that I can give you the kind of body that men envy and women admire. Biceps that can dish it out and a muscle-ridged stomach that can take it. A full, deep barrel-chest. Legs that never tire. A tough, sinewy back that you can put a mountain on. And a general all-around physique that can laugh at fatigue and ANY kind of rough going.

Today, a mighty wave of FITNESS is surging over America! What about YOU? Suppose YOU are called to the colors! Will your body be the laughing-stock of the company—or the kind of big-muscled physique that will command the envy of all your buddies? Suppose YOU are called for home defense! Have you the he-man strength and tireless energy that double-shifts of working and watching may call for? Why RIGHT NOW many soldiers and sailors in active service are using my methods. They know that a MAN'S body means "easier going," more fun and quicker promotion!

CHARLES ATLAS
An actual, untouched photo of "The World's Most Perfectly-Developed Man"

Would You Believe I Was Once A 97-lb. Weakling?

Yes, I was—a miserable 97-pound bag of skin and bones! But you'd never believe it to look at me now, would you? Through my discovery of "Dynamic Tension" I changed myself into "The World's Most Perfectly-Developed Man." I'm LIVING PROOF of the miracles "Dynamic Tension" can perform—right in the privacy of your own home! NOW—will you give my method 15 minutes a day to get the kind of HE-MAN build you have always longed to have? Will you take the tape-measure's word for it that I can put inches of muscles all over your body?

Here's PROOF Right Here!

"Results come so fast by your method that it seems just as if some magician put on the pounds of solid muscle just where you want them!" —W.L., Missouri

"Feel like a million dollars and have a 44" normal chest—A 2" GAIN IN 4 DAYS!" —L.A.S., Illinois

"My doctor thinks your course is fine. In 15 days have put two inches on my chest and ½ inch on my neck." —B.L., Oregon

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"Your book opened my eyes . . . 1¼" gain on my biceps and 1" more on my chest in two weeks!" —J.F., Penna.

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CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 83N, 115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.

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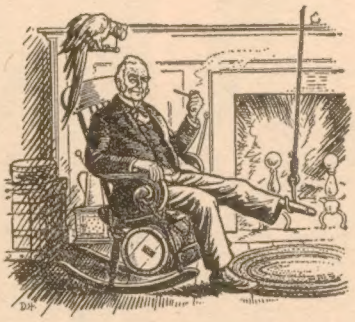
CLIPPER "STAGHOUND," built in 1850, still holds the Boston-Equator sailing record! Ships like this often carried kegs of whiskey. For the rocking ocean improved its flavor.

Old Mr. Boston says:

"In Rocking Chair... I've recaptured the long-lost flavor of 'wave-rocked' whiskeys!"



BACK HOME ON SHORE, those canny captains continued to "rock the keg" — beneath pine rockers. And from these famous "rocked" whiskeys comes our inspiration for Rocking Chair, with its almost-forgotten taste and richness!

NO SEA-ROCKED WHISKEY would have surpassed Rocking Chair in smoothness and flavor! For Mr. Boston recaptures that famous flavor *by controlled agitation in his special blending process.* Change to Rocking Chair Whiskey today!

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War Call of the Singing Wire

A thrilling epic novel of the first transcontinental telegraph line

By
CHARLES W. TYLER

CHAPTER ONE

War-Smoke Pilgrim

PRINT CHRISTIAN kept watching the single strand of iron wire that stretched away across the sage plains. Old Jacques La Bonte, the bull-whacker, called it Creighton's Lightnin' Line—the first transcontinental telegraph.

The poles were like sentinels, standing stiffly at attention before the slogging march of the wagon-train. There was no end to them. Out of Omaha, they had come—markers of the Oregon Trail. Now creaking wheels counted them off—twenty-five to the mile—as the dusty pageant crawled West.

Then there was a pole that was not erect, but lying on the ground beside a ragged stub. And another, and another. The wire had been torn from the insulators. Long spans of it had disappeared.

Sprawled alongside one of these cottonwood poles was a soldier. Print stared at the dead man, while little icy fingers crawled up his spine.

Death was not new to Print Christian, for he had seen it in the war between the North and the South; had seen so much that he had become hardened. But never before had he seen a man who had been scalped. His glance moved on, a queer knot tightening at the pit of his stomach.

A horse was down. A second man was crumpled in a buffalo wallow, an arrow

A slender, gleaming, fragile string—the mighty telegraph—protected the far-flung outposts of America's Western Empire, clicking the message of courage to distant fighting pioneer patrols. Print Christian's job was to keep that wire open—and to hell with white renegades, and the whole damned painted legions of the Sioux Nation!

standing in him. Farther on were half a dozen prostrate forms—soldiers in the uniform of the U. S. cavalry.

Ever since the train had left Fort Kearney, Nebraska, there had been reports of Sioux war parties, but this was the first time the caravan had come on the scene of a recent fight. The news ran back along the wagons with feverish swiftness. There was the growing murmur of excited voices as men and women began moving toward the head of the train.

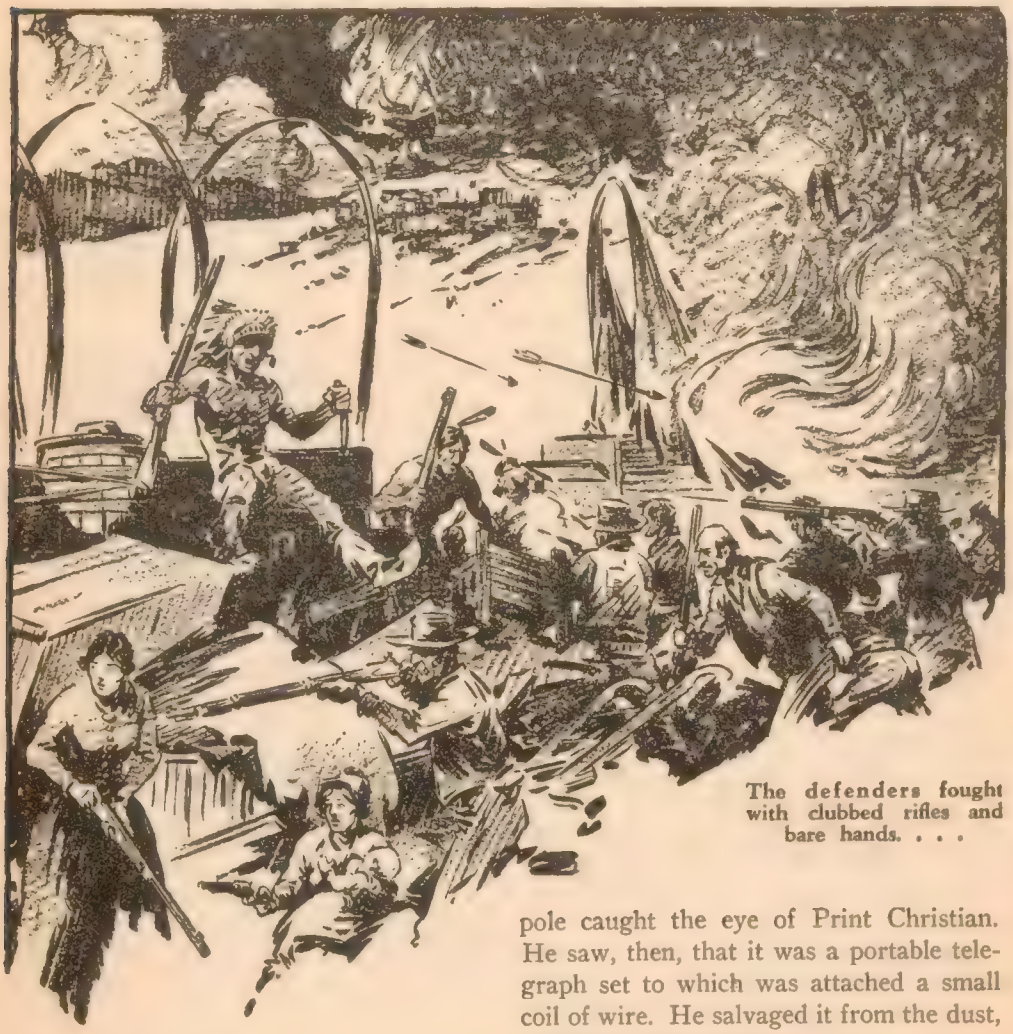
Old La Bonte's beady black eyes swept the surrounding country with brisk alertness. He scowled and shook his head. "By Gar, she's bad business, I t'ink."

Hugh Kirkendall, bearded boss of the wagon-train, and several riders swung away toward the summit of a nearby ridge. There was a growing group near the dead soldier now—grim-faced men; women, their eyes bright with apprehension.

A little man in a wide-awake hat said, "Couldn't have happened mor'n a couple hours ago."

Apparently a small party had come out to repair the telegraph line and had been attacked. The men had plainly been surprised, overwhelmed before their task had begun.

Something alongside the stump of a pole caught the eye of Print Christian. He saw, then, that it was a portable telegraph set to which was attached a small coil of wire. He salvaged it from the dust, fondled it almost lovingly.



The defenders fought with clubbed rifles and bare hands. . . .

The great plains had been new to him; the immensity of the West had from the first filled him with awe, wonder; talk of Indians had seemed like some vague, unreal threat that would never materialize; the great pillar that was Chimney Rock, looming ahead, had been more like a phantom column in a land of make-believe.

Even these dead men in the sage merely lent an atmosphere of weird illusion to the things that had unfolded before his eyes. But this telegraph set, this clutter of brass and wire coils, was something substantial, something tangible. This was something that Print Christian knew about and could understand.

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A NAKED Sioux in war paint, riding a spotted pony, appeared on a ridge. Print Christian stared at the skylined figure, then shot a quick glance at old Jacques La Bonte. When he looked again the warrior had gone.

Hugh Kirkendall and the other riders returned at a gallop.

"Wheel those wagons into corral!" the boss of the train shouted. "Then unhitch your teams an' git your guns an' ammunition ready."

A big Missourian swore, cracked his bull whip. "Gee, boy! Hup!"

A woman's plaintive voice cried, "Why don't they give us an escort? Where are the soldiers?"

"There's some of 'em, ma'am," Kirkendall said with a wave of his hand.

Print Christian hurried toward him. "How far is Fort Laramie, Mr. Kirkendall?" They were about fifteen miles from Fort Mitchell, he knew, for the wagon train had made camp there night before last.

"Twenty-five mile, boy. Might as well be a thousand. Only chance we got is to send a courier back to Mitchell . . . if he kin git through."

"I can telegraph for help," Print said breathlessly.

Kirkendall stared at him, eyed the thing in his hand. "What ye got there?"

"A telegraph instrument. One of the soldiers must have had it."

"An' ye know how to work that thing?"

"Yes, sir." Print's words ran on excitedly. "I can attach one end of the cut wire to this set, make a ground and get a message through. I've done it lots of times. I—I was a telegrapher in the South."

Kirkendall regarded the youth with hard, keen eyes, seeing a peaked-faced, gaunt youngster wearing an old Confederate cap—a boy no more than eighteen, he seemed, with straight-looking blue eyes and a shock of straw-colored hair tumbling across his temple.

"All right, Reb, see what ye kin do," Kirkendall said. "But if this repair party come from Fort Mitchell there likely ain't no telegrapher there to read them dots an' dashes."

"Then I'll try the other end of the break," Print Christian said.

The bullwhackers were yelling, lashing at the plodding oxen. Cumbersome wagons were circling into corral. Horsemen were galloping back and forth. Dust swirled up. Somewhere a baby was crying.

A prairie schooner trundled past, and Print had a glimpse of a woman at the opening in the back, with small, frightened faces clustered about her. That was the Purdy family from St. Joe, a fragile, poverty-ridden lot who never should have started. And there were the Bissells and the Petersons and Hilary Burnham and Gail. . . .

Print ran to the foot of the nearest standing pole. He picked up the dragging strand of wire there and made it fast to a binding post of the telegraph instrument; then he dug in his ground wire, and was rewarded by a faint click, indicating that the line was alive. Quick hope built up in him.

The wire was through to Fort Mitchell. His fingers played on the key with frantic insistence.

Once, when he had been attached to General Pickett's command, he had worked from the top of a telegraph pole

under fire. He had been fifteen then, and not half as excited, for that had been part of the day's work. But now the lives of women and children depended on the speed of the telegraph.

At last there was a break. Print closed the key and listened, his ear close to the armature of the sounder. But the stuttering impulses were ragged, broken, and too weak for him to read. The sender was farther away than Fort Mitchell, and he decided it must be the operator at Lodge Pole Creek Crossing, almost back to Julesburg.

There was no one at Fort Mitchell, then, who could read the Morse characters. Kirkendall had been right when he'd voiced the opinion that the repair party might have come from Mitchell.

Print disconnected the instrument and came to his feet, his eyes swinging to the West. Close to seven hundred yards of wire were down—almost half a mile.

At that moment he heard a thin, far cry, swelling to a long-drawn staccato yell. His gaze turned to the North. The second ridge was crawling with movement. He thought there must be at least a thousand Indian warriors starting their charge.

His heart sank. They would be screaming down on the wagon-train before he could cover half of the distance to that first, far-away pole.

CHAPTER TWO

Morse Warrior's Battle Chant

PRINT CHRISTIAN had been fourteen when he had joined the army of the Confederacy. The telegraph service had had neither definite personnel nor corp organization. The operators were merely civilians attached to the quartermaster's department; they were an important but unrecognized cog in the war.

Often forgotten in the vast confusion of battle, they had been thrown on their own resources. It had been those bloody, frightful years that had taught Print initiative, self-reliance, courage.

Print jammed his battered cap more firmly onto his head and looked around for a horse. His eye hit on a mule, geared with an old U. S. cavalry saddle. He ran toward the animal.

At that moment Tim Monahan appeared, lugging a Springfield breech-loading rifle. He was a lank man of forty-odd, with the map of Ireland on his homely face. He wore a faded-blue army coat and cap, its stiff, glazed visor turned up in front. A belt looped his waist, and attached to it was a bayonet scabbard and cartridge case.

Kirkendall rode up. "What luck, Reb?"

"Fort Mitchell don't answer."

" 'Lowed they wouldn't. One of these dead soldiers must be the operator, like I figgered."

"I'm goin' to try an' make it to the other end of the break," Print said.

"Hell, it's suicide, boy," Kirkendall cried. "Time ye git there an' hook that contraption up, ye'll be so full of arrers ye'll look like a porkypine."

Tim Monahan looked at Print, blinked. "Faith an' yez will be after needin' an escort, me bucky, an it's Tim Monahan who'll go wit' ye."

"Them red devils will lift yore scalp," Kirkendall growled.

"Sure, an' the joke will be on thim," said Monahan, jerking off his cap and exposing a shiny bald dome.

"We'll need every man right here," Kirkendall protested.

"Yis, an' ye'll have use fer the regulars, too," retorted the Irishman, "from the number of spalpeens I see yonder."

A girl had joined the little group, and stood listening, wide-eyed. Climbing onto the mule, Print saw her for the first time. As far back as Fort Kearney he had discovered that it would be mighty easy to

fall in love with a girl like Gail Burnham, for she was as pretty as sunrise, and now, in her billowing print calico, she seemed more lovely than ever.

With her father and mother, she had joined the wagon train at Independence, Missouri. Sarah Burnham, a frail, sweet-faced woman, had died on the way. A small marker stood in her memory beside the Oregon Trail.

The girl's face was flushed, her eyes bright, but she seemed cool, unafraid. "Wait!" she cried and dashed toward her father's wagon. A moment later she was back. "Take this. It's a Henry; sixteen-shot." She handed Print the rifle and two boxes of cartridges.

"Thanks, Gail," Print said.

Tim Monahan had clambered up behind Print and was belaboring the mule's rump with the butt of his rifle. "Git on, Beelzebub, or ye'll be eatin' oats in Purgatory wit' your betters."

Print reined the mule toward a ravine a short distance away, and a few moments later they had dropped from view beneath the rim. For some distance the gully paralleled the rutted wagon trail; then opened at the base of a hill. The Indians were pelting down a slope not a quarter of a mile away, an undulating phalanx of whooping warriors.

♣ ♣ ♣

CHRISTIAN thought he would never forget that sight. He had seen great waves of cavalry moving into battle, solid ranks of infantry at the charge, bayonets fixed; field pieces and caissons wheeling into position, but never anything as savagely beautiful as this.

The ponies were largely pintos; white-spotted, black-spotted, brown-spotted. Others were daubed with colors like their naked riders. There were shields and pinioned lances and quivers, with here and there the war-bonnet of a chief. The bodies of the Indians were kaleidoscopic in their markings of white and green and yellow.

Print was surprised to observe that many of the Sioux carried rifles. Somehow he had thought of the Indians as being armed only with bows and arrows.

The thunder of hoofs and the strident yells hammered at his ears. Dust winnowed up until it seemed that the savages were floating on a fast-flowing gray carpet. Guns started to bark, and the Indians ran out like an unraveling thread, as they began circling the wagon corral, the white tops of the train like puffs of cotton at the foot of the long slope.

Approaching the first standing telegraph pole, Print became increasingly convinced that they had managed to escape detection. But Monahan suddenly growled a warning. "Some of 'em have seen us. Tin or a dozen are comin' this way at full tilt."

Print jerked the mule up at the foot of the pole. The wire had been cut close to the wooden insulator. He glanced up; then shot a look over his shoulder and sucked in his breath.

The approaching Indians were hardly two hundred yards away. Tim Monahan had already jumped from the mule. Print payed out the small coil that was the ground wire, and handed the loose end to the Irishman. "Fasten that around the barrel of your gun," he said; "then fix the bayonet and jam it into the ground. That will make one side of the circuit."

Monahan obeyed unquestioningly. Print handed down the Henry rifle and cartridges, stuffed the telegraph set inside his shirt and, standing erect on the saddle, grabbed for the pole and began to shinney up.

Tim Monahan's first shot dropped the mule in its tracks and he threw himself prostrate behind the kicking beast, pumping a fresh cartridge into the chamber as the Sioux came on.

Something struck the pole close under Print, and he glanced down to see the shaft of an arrow quivering there. His lips tightened grimly. Old Jacques La Bonte had said that an Indian could drive an arrow through a man at one hundred yards.

The Henry cracked and the leading savage sprawled headlong from his painted pony.

Print connected the short piece of hanging wire to a binding post of the portable set. That the line was alive was indicated by a sharp click, and the youth knew a feeling of breathless exultance. He almost felt like singing.

He opened the key and began sending, fast. Dots and dashes of the Morse code flowed over the wire. Almost at once there was a response. Fort Laramie was answering. Print Christian wanted to yell. Give him just a few seconds now and they could riddle him, but he'd have sent his call for help.

A bullet snarled past. An arrow hissed so close that he felt its cool breath. Below him, the Henry was barking as fast as Tim Monahan could work the lever. The Indians were circling, their bodies partly shielded behind their galloping ponies. A horse went down; its rider staggered up and started to run, but Monahan promptly tipped him over with a slug from his merciless rifle.

Print, his bony legs locked tight about the pole, began sending with expert fingers. "Large body of Indians attacking wagon-train 25 miles east of you. Wire repair party from Ft. Mitchell wiped out."

The operator at Laramie acknowledged, and asked for the identity of the sender. Followed an interval of silence; then the sounder began to click out Morse letters. The message thus formed read:

Cavalry troop leaving at once.
General Connor.

CHRISTIAN snatched off his cap and waved it, hoping that someone at the wagon-train would see, and thus understand that help was coming.

A moment later he slid down the pole, pulled the wire from the Springfield and flung himself down alongside Tim Monahan.

"Did ye make it, Reb?" the Irishman asked.

"A troop is coming," Print said.

Tim uttered an exultant yell, which he punctuated with a shot that tumbled a second pony. Print lined the sights of the Springfield on a third horse and the gun roared.

For a few minutes the fight continued with savage fury; then the remaining riders moved away to rejoin the main body attacking the wagon train.

The Irishman and young telegrapher raced back toward the ravine. Once, several bucks galloped along the rim, but Print and Tim managed to conceal themselves under the overhang of the gully's cut bank. They watched helplessly while two wagons, which had been cut off from the train, were set afire by flaming arrows and then overwhelmed by a detachment of Sioux. The defenders fought with clubbed rifles and bare hands but the Indians finally prevailed.

At last the furious, volleying reports beyond slackened. Print stole another look over the lip of the ravine. The Indians were drawing off. Print and Tim made a dash for the wagons, to be greeted by lusty yells. Print told breathlessly of making contact with Fort Laramie. "A cavalry troop is on the way," he yelled.

A woman cried, "Thank God for Edward Creighton and his telegraph line!"

Gail Burnham came and stood beside Print, her eyes shining. "It was a brave thing you did," she said. "I was scared to death; more for you than the rest of us, I guess."

"I couldn't have done it," Print said, embarrassed by the praise of the girl and the others, "if it hadn't been for Tim Monahan."

Hugh Kirkendall was grimly exultant. "The red devils know that wire yonder can carry messages. They won't hang 'round long."

The Indians had lost a considerable number in the attack, but the train was not without its casualties. In addition to the wagons which had been cut off and their defenders slaughtered, the caravan had lost Hank Purdy. The Peterson's oldest girl, Lucy, had been struck by an arrow and was dying. Andy Turner, a young bullwhacker, had been wounded. Two others were dead. Several had been injured.

The Sioux soon began trailing away over the first ridge, apparently convinced that before long the soldiers would be coming from Fort Laramie.

Print, moving about the wagons, heard a woman crying, and he found Mrs. Peterson, her back against a wagon wheel, holding Lucy's head in her lap. The girl was dead. Mrs. Purdy stood by their dilapidated prairie schooner looking stunned and heartbroken, the children clinging to her skirt.

Already a group of grim-faced men with spades were digging graves. . . .

It was Jacques La Bonte who first called attention to the fact that the fallen telegraph poles had been chopped down with axes.

"That's the work of white men," Kirkendall said angrily. "I figgered somethin' like that. Hackin' off eight-inch poles with tommyhawks is too much work fer redskins. Mostly they pile buffalo chips around the poles an' set 'em afire."

"But why would white men do this?" Print asked.

"Because there's a lot o' sneakin' renegades in the country," the wagon boss growled. "They overrun the Overland Trail down 'round Virginia Dale Station, an' of late they been movin' north to the Oregon Trail an' the Bozeman. What deviltry the pesky Injuns don't know them white hellions l'arn 'em."

Print found it hard to believe that white men would conspire with these savages to attack a wagon-train. It was understandable that the Indians, their domain threatened by the emigrants, should do everything possible to retard and hamper the trains. But for whites to prey on their own kind . . . he shook his head, still perplexed.

However, Kirkendall explained it this way: "Every year, between April an' November, thar's thousands o' wagons rollin' west. The freighters are loaded with supplies and store goods. After a bull train has been attacked, the Injuns take the hosses, guns an' ammunition mostly, leavin' the rest of the stuff fer the renegades. Them freebooters peddle it to stage stations, sutlers' stores an' the minin' camps. Ain't nobody kin prove they didn't haul it from St. Louis."

It was ghastly business, and Print resolved to keep his eyes open, and his ears. Somewhere farther on he might meet some of these renegade white men. His lean jaw set grimly; his blue eyes carried a cold glint.

The one thing that might beat these pirates of the plains was the thin strand that was the telegraph wire. That they feared it was evident, else they would not unite with the Indians in attempting to destroy it, to silence its small, metallic voice.

CHAPTER THREE

The Wagons Roll On

ALMOST eighty days had passed since the train had left Independence. There had been storms, floods, sickness and death. Looking back, Print saw again gay, happy faces around

those first campfires. Fired by hope they'd been.

These same faces were now haggard, careworn. Wheels that had talked of a bright, new land in the West rolled now in the red ruts of the Sioux Nation. Henceforth, eternal vigilance would not only be the watchword but the living necessity.

Came the dragoons, grimed fighting men of the Eleventh Ohio Cavalry, their mounts greasy wtih muddy lather. A young brevet lieutenant surveyed the scene and shook his head as he listened to the story of the attack.

"The forts are undermanned," he said. "There's never enough soldiers to guard these telegraph repair parties, let alone provide escorts for the wagon-trains."

"We buried the men from Fort Mitchell," Kirkendall said, "along with our own folks."

The lieutenant nodded. "We'll move them to Fort Laramie later," he said. "Right now, we've got to repair the line. Who telegraphed in?"

"Here, sir," Print said.

The lieutenant eyed him, looked at the battered Confederate cap; smiled thinly. "Nice work, Johnny Reb." He added: "We've got some galvanized troops at Laramie. They're good soldiers."

Print knew that galvanized troops meant rebels who had taken part in the celebrated Morgan raids, and had later enlisted to fight Indians in preference to being sent to northern military prisons.

A search revealed the wire coils that had been brought from Fort Mitchell, and the cavalrymen and volunteers from the wagon-train set to work to reset the poles.

Print once more rigged the telegraph set and reported to Fort Laramie, giving a terse account of the fight and stating that the cavalry detachment had arrived safely.

"Please make yourself known to post commander upon arrival here," the sounder clicked. "We can use you." It was signed John Friend, Fort Laramie.

Print felt a small glow of pride. He had hoped to become a part of this vast new network of communication, and now the door was open. The telegraphers at the stations were enlisted soldiers. Civilian operators "hadn't lost any Indians" and were reluctant to risk their lives at these isolated frontier posts.

New wire was spliced, strung, stretched and tied in.

Already Kirkendall had given orders to break corral, and the wagons were lining out. The parting scenes at the fresh-mounded graves made a deep and lasting impression on Print Christian.

Things would never be the same again for Mrs. Purdy or the Petersons. Andy Turner had been so strong and robust; as though nothing could ever happen to him. Print saw Sam Bissell's girl, Nora, looking back through the gray curtain of dust. She was crying softly. They'd been in love—Andy and Nora.

Print joined Hilary Burnham, the tall, raw-boned Yank, stalking stiffly beside the oxen of his big Conestoga wagon. He became aware at last of Gail, close by, swinging her hips in strong stride, her head thrown back, her eyes unafraid. . . .

Fort Laramie, caught against the bosom of the rolling hills on the south bank of the North Platte, held a strange fascination for Print Christian. It was the largest and most famous post on the Great Medicine Road, Sioux name for the Oregon Trail, and the buildings had long since spread beyond the fort.

Forty-Niners had come this way. Here the hand-cart caravans of the Mormons had rested. Fur traders, freighters; the stagecoach, the Pony Express, the telegraph builders, all had played a part at Laramie.

The buildings were solid, substantial. There were one or two two-story structures. There were cavalry stables, the post sutlers' stores, the quartermaster's

supply depot; the old fort, with its high bastions; the hospital; the cemetery.

Along the river were a large number of wagons and the camps of the emigrants. There were the white cones of an Indian encampment. Jacques La Bonte said there were always Indians here: friendly Crows; sometimes Sioux, coming to powwow.

At the telegraph office, Print was greeted warmly by John Friend, the soldier-operator. "I have a message for you from General Dodge, Christian," the man said.

Greenville M. Dodge was a name familiar to Print. The general had authority over all overland mail routes and telegraph lines to the Pacific.

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THE young telegrapher flushed when he read the wire. "I commend you for your nerve and valor," it said. "Yours is the courage that will do much toward the building of this new empire." It was signed, "General Dodge, Department of the Missouri."

A little later, Print found himself stiffly saluting the post commander, General Connor. He was introduced to Colonel Alexander Majors, of the vast freighting enterprise of Russell, Majors and Waddell. He met Jim Bridger, a man of whom he had heard much.

He was discomforted and somewhat confused by the attention he received.

"You were a Confederate telegrapher?" asked General Connor, smiling at Print's embarrassment.

"Yes, sir." And, with a hint of pride: "I was fourteen when I joined up."

"The Confederate States could well have been proud of you, my boy."

"I just worked a key; I didn't do no shootin'."

"But you must have been under fire."

"Oh, some, sir."

"You were under fire when the Indians attacked the train day before yesterday, and you fought back."

"Reckon I was scared of losin' my hair," Print said. "Anyhow, it was Tim Monahan who held off the Indians while I got the telegraph fixed."

"I wish we had more civilian operators like you in this country," the commander said. He went on after a little, "There is an acute shortage of telegraphers, and General Dodge has suggested that you be assigned to a post. If you care to accept, I'd like you to go to Horseshoe Station, west of here. The operator there now will have to replace the man from Fort Mitchell, who was killed at the scene of the recent attack."

Print stared, blinked his blue eyes. He'd been kicked around a lot. Kind words and appreciation from high places were new to him. He'd belonged to the wrong side, if you looked at it one way—a lost cause, but a glorious cause.

At last he stammered his acceptance. "Don't reckon I'm good enough, but I'll do the best I know how, sir."

"I know you will. But, I warn you, it will be extremely hazardous. Beside being the operator at Horseshoe Station, you will have to assist at repairing and maintaining the line for some distance to East and West. Not only will there be the constant threat of Sioux attack, but you may have to contend with outlaws and stage robbers."

"Like the renegades that chopped down them telegraph poles?"

"That's right."

"I wouldn't mind fightin' them kind," Print said grimly. "They need killin'." He spoke then of Mrs. Purdy. He'd taken turns with Tim Monahan driving her oxen the last couple days. "It don't seem fitten for her to go on, sir. Seems like she'd kinda like for to stay near Hank."

"We'll look out for her," the general said. "There's work she can do; in the laundry perhaps."

Print voiced his thanks; then hurried to the place where the emigrants were camped. First he found Mrs. Purdy and told her what the commander had said; after that he sought out Gail.

"I ain't just a driftin' Reb no more," he informed the girl gayly. "I'm goin' to be a part of the Oregon Trail an' the Overland Telegraph."

CHAPTER FOUR

Three Hard Cases

PRINT didn't like the looks of the three men talking to a group of emigrants and freighters. They reminded him of hard cases he'd seen in Julesburg.

One was tall, bearded; a hulking, hard-eyed man of forty or so. The second was stocky, bull-chested, with a rat-tail mustache and the inherent furtiveness of one who is apprehensive of things behind his back.

The third was younger; under thirty, Print thought. He was Indian-black, with a hawk-beaked nose, a high-boned face and black, shifty eyes.

Gail whispered that this man had been identified by one of the freighters as a half-breed named Cass Kuder. She said the big man called himself Jake Taggart and that the other was Burl Irby, a trader.

The conversation concerned the Bozeman Trail. Taggart said he was seeking to organize a wagon-train to travel to the gold camps. He named Virginia City and Bannack, Montana.

"That's a likely outfit ye got, Yank," Taggart told Hilary Burnham. "Better'n most. Want to jine us? Lots o' opportunity in that country."

Sime Tweedy, a little bullwhacker, pushed back his wide-awake hat and slanted a disgusted look at the big man. "Yare," he hooted, "lots er oppetun'ty t' git skelped."

Taggart scowled at him. " 'Low it don't

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take much to scare a runt like you."

"Sime isn't a coward!" Gail cried, her eyes snapping. "He fought as bravely as anyone when the Indians attacked us the other day."

Taggart ignored her. "'Course, the bigger the train the better, but anythin' over twenty wagons would git through all right."

"I ain't fer leavin' the beaten trail," said Hilary Burnham in his Vermont twang. "Most of us invested nigh every cent we got in our outfits. Then there's the women an' children to be considered."

Jake Taggart's eyes held a crafty glint as his glance slid over the New Englander's big, well-found Conestoga wagon.

Print knew that such an outfit, including the oxen, cost about seven thousand dollars. He remembered what Hugh Kirkendall had said about the renegades who looted the wagon-trains. He thought of the telegraph poles, cut by the axes of white men, and those bloody, mutilated forms in blue in the dust, and his brain turned sharp with mistrust of this hard-bitten trio.

"What ye haulin', Yank?" Burl Irby asked in his harsh, rasping voice.

"Oh, this an' t'other," Burnham evaded.

"Haw!" Irby hooted. "Jist like a cussed Yankee. Tight-fisted 'n' tight-jawed."

The wagons of Taggart and Burl Irby had been edged in close. Print moved to the nearest one and shook a wheel.

"What *you* fellers haulin'?" The clack of the hub on the axle spoke of a well-nigh empty wagon. The big, canvas-shrouded schooners rolling west were never light laden. The tedious miles were won at too great a price to travel without a load. Both ends of this wagon were closed tight against prying eyes.

"Git away from thar!" Taggart snarled.

"Scairt I might tip it over?" Print said.

"I'll tip you over, ye impudent pup!"

Sime Tweedy asked Taggart where he had camped the night before. The answer was, "Sage Springs."

Sage Springs, Print knew, was twenty miles away. It verified the sound of the wheel. A bull team could make twenty miles, traveling light; loaded, they seldom covered more than ten or twelve.

These men were outlaws, of that Print was convinced, but there was little he could do, other than to keep his eyes and ears open. However, he resolved to tell Kirkendall of his suspicions at the first opportunity.

♦ ♦ ♦

JAKE TAGGART talked of the rich Gallatin Valley in Montana, of the opportunities at the gold camps; of Last Chance Gulch, now Helena; of Texas herds moving up the Bozeman.

Burl Irby mentioned the forts on the Bozeman Road—Reno, Phil Kearney and C. F. Smith—but did not reveal that they were under-garrisoned and bottled up by Red Cloud's warriors.

"Russell, Majors an' Waddell are sendin' bull trains up the Bozeman with supplies," he said. "We could go along with one of them outfits."

"Nelson Story's got three thousand cattle at the river north o' Horseshoe Station," Cass Kuder said. "Told me he figgers to take 'em up the Bozeman. He allows it ain't so bad as they say."

"It's bad enough," put in a rangy mountain man.

"The Crows are friendly," Taggart went on. "Sioux are all right, if ye know how to handle 'em."

"Do you know how?" Gail demanded.

"Sure do, Miss. Me'n Irby, here, we smoked plenty with the Injuns."

"You're not an emigrant then?" the girl said.

Jake Taggart shifted his bulk, tugged

at his beard. "I 'low to do a little tradin'."

A trader with an empty wagon, Print thought. This man had come in from the East. He couldn't have been far away when the Indians had attacked the train. It looked mighty queer.

"Do you sell axes?" Print asked.

Jake Taggart stiffened; his eyes turned savage. "That's my affair," he rasped.

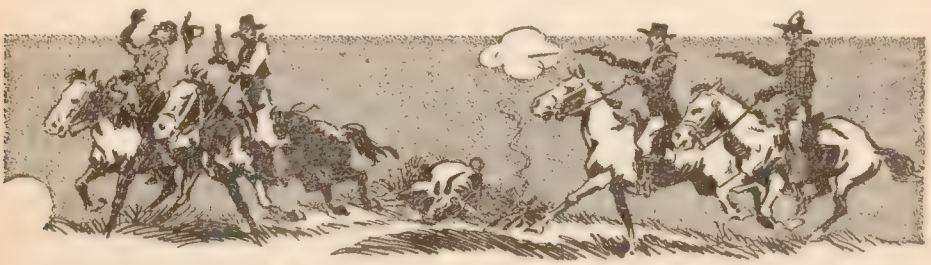
"Calkerlate to rest up a few days," Hilary Burnham was saying. "I'll make inquiries about the Bozeman."

"Gen'ral Connor or Jim Bridger can tell you what you want to know, I guess," Print said, feeling quite important.

"What do you know about Bridger?" Burl Irby flung out.

HILARY BURNHAM learned the next morning that Jim Bridger had never considered the Bozeman Road practicable. Alexander Majors revealed that he planned to send a bull train over the route, but declared it would not be until he had marshaled at least one hundred wagons. Even then it would be dangerous.

There were no stage lines into the Big Horn country; no communication, except mail and dispatches carried by Army riders. Fort Phil Kearney, on the Little Piney, was still under construction and in a constant state of siege. General Carrington's wood-cutters were continually harassed by hard-fighting Indians.



"I met 'im," Print said, "an' Mister Majors too." He added, "I'm goin' to work in the telegraph office at Horseshoe Station."

A quick glance passed between Taggart and Burl Irby.

"Slade's old station," said the latter.

Jake Taggart's eyes narrowed. "So ye're a telegrapher, bub?" His voice was throaty, half-menacing.

"Remarkable, this here wire Creighton strung acrost the Sioux Nation," Irby said, with a crooked leer. "Trouble is, it ain't always workin'."

"Wa'n't workin' t'other day," Sime Tweedy cackled, "accordin' to some. But this here Johnny Reb shinned a pole, an' right soon he's jerkin' lightnin' out o' the air, a-chirpin' fer the sojers, whilst them painted varmints tried to knock 'em kitin'."

"The Bozeman is a road of dead men's graves," General Connor said. "It's littered with the remnants of burned wagons." He concluded, "Stick to the Oregon Trail, Burnham. You'll be much better off."

Print felt better. The talk the night before had filled him with doubt, misgiving. Kirkendall and old Jacques La Bonte had been freighting over the Oregon Trail for a long time, and they thought they might recognize Taggart and Irby and the man called Cass Kuder, though their names were unfamiliar. However, it was discovered that they had pulled out. Nobody in the wagon-train knew where the trio had gone.

Waiting to take the stage to Horseshoe Station, Print heard talk of road-agents in the Sweetwater country. He thought highwaymen were a lot better

than renegades who plotted with Indians to attack wagon-trains.

It had been hard saying good-by to Mrs. Purdy and the kids, but Print looked forward to meeting the others again, for they would be moving on west in a week or so.

He waved to Gail from a window of the stage; then settled back to enjoy his first ride in one of Ben Holladay's big six-horse Concord's. His head was full of strange, confused thoughts. He'd been a little rebel, caught in the mad days of reconstruction. Gropingly he'd turned west.

Suddenly he had a job. Hiram Sibley, president of the Western Union, whose vision and courage had made possible the building of the line, was his boss.

Print bent up the visor of his old Confederate cap, the way Tim Monahan had his battered blue one, and set it firmly on his head, like a jaunty crown. . . .

Print Christian found himself housed in a permanent telegraph office for the first time. It was a small room close to the quarters of Lieutenant Grummond, there at Horseshoe Station.

There was a fixed key, sounder and relay, with rows of glass jars on a shelf—the crow's-foot batteries—which provided the current that boosted the stammering impulses of the wires into racketing Morse characters.

On the walls were pictures from old magazines and the carved initials of operators who had been there before him. Tacked above the telegraph table was a Sioux scalp, a gruesome relic of an encounter that had, Print was told, cost the lives of half a troop.

Horseshoe Station itself consisted of a stout log stockade, which surrounded the soldiers' quarters, the parade ground, stables, warehouse, granary and other log structures. At one corner was a blockhouse.

Everything seemed safe and secure, a lot safer than a wagon-train, Print ventured. But Lieutenant Grummond said there was so safety anywhere. The hunting and war trails were crawling with savages, while lurking along the roads of the stage and wagon-trains were white renegades.

Print told of the efforts of Jake Taggart and Irby to organize a train to go up the Bozeman. The lieutenant said he had heard of Irby, a profligate trader, who peddled whiskey and guns to the Indians in return for peltries. Taggart and Kuder, he thought, were part of an outlaw gang that had been operating in the vicinity of Whiskey Gap, farther west.

Print heard stories of incredible torture and mutilation, of wanton plundering and killing, and he came to feel his own responsibility more and more. That thin strand of wire was the veritable lifeline of the Oregon Trail, and he had only to look at the battered, blood-stained telegraph instrument he'd salvaged there east of Laramie to be reminded that Old Man Death worked a trick at the key.

Yet he was caught by the spell of romance and raw adventure. There was, too, the determination to prove worthy of the trust placed in him by General Dodge.

CHAPTER FIVE

Battle Call of Broken Wires

PRINT CHRISTIAN came in for a lot of joshing. The soldiers called him Galvanized Johnny, and declared the army must be in sore straights when it had to enlist the services of a reb brass-pounder.

But Print didn't mind; he had rubbed shoulders with hard-bitten fighting men before. Better men were hard to find, he said, than the sons of Dixie.

"Reckon the redskins would a-whupped you Yanks long ago," he told them, "if

it hadn't been for them galvanized soldiers."

As the days passed, the telegraph sounder at Horseshoe Station brought terse reports of the things that were happening. "Wire down west of Sweetwater; repair party leaving. . . . Wagons attacked at Devil's Slide. . . . Horse Creek at flood; poles out. . . . Ogallala Sioux sacked St. Mary's Station; stock tender and operator killed. . . ."

News of the world. The Great Eastern and the Atlantic Cable. . . . Tennessee granted representation. . . . Pacific Telegraph absorbed by the Western Union. Messages from Washington, Omaha, Salt Lake, San Francisco—quick glimpses of far horizons, casting their fleeting shadows at Horseshoe Station, Territory of Dakota.

Breaks along the line were frequent. Buffalo had rubbed a pole down; lightning had split another. A tree had fallen across the wire. There were insulators to be replaced; slack to be pulled.

Print spent long, weary hours in the saddle under a blazing sun. He rode in storm, braving swollen streams and slogging through grease-slick ooze. In making repairs, he was accompanied by a small detachment of cavalrymen. However, several times he went alone at night, hunting breaks in the line.

John Friend, at Fort Laramie, reported that Red Cloud, the great Ogallala Sioux chief, had been in for a council. The Bozeman Road was the bone of contention, for it invaded the rich hunting ground of the redmen.

Warriors were observed in increasing numbers in the vicinity. Nelson Story rode in from the old Bridger Crossing with news that a maurading party of braves had stampeded his cattle and run off most of the horses in his cavvy. A stage driven by Bill Cody had been attacked near Three Crossings' Station.

Brittle messages cracked through. All of the way from Fort Laramie to South Pass, operators grew increasingly tense, grim, watchful. Everywhere was growing apprehension.

Print snatched sleep when he could, there in his bunk close to the telegraph table. Only total exhaustion dulled his brain to the point where he failed to catch the first tapping cry of the Horseshoe Station call letters.

It was not the quick crackle of the sounder that hit at Print's dimming consciousness tonight, but another ominous note. Something that spelled trouble.

The last lament of taps was trailing away against the dead silence of the Dakota night. Print never heard that plaintive bugle call that he didn't think of Hank Purdy and Andy Turner and Lucy Peterson. Always it brought home the picture of another grim mile-post of the wagon-trains; the charge of the painted savages, the volleying crash of gunfire, the graves at the foot of the long slope.

He thought of them now, and of the chopped poles. He thought of the leering, crafty face of Burl Irby; the wolf-glint in the eye of Jake Taggart.

With flour selling for thirty dollars a sack and other necessities in proportion, with good oxen worth close to a thousand dollars a pair, looting the trains was a profitable enterprise.

Two days ago, John Friend had rapped out a message, announcing the departure of Hugh Kirkendall's wagons from Fort Laramie. The freighter had been accompanied by Hilary Burnham and the others. They should be camped some ten or twelve miles east of Horseshoe Station tonight, Print reflected. His apprehension increased.

It had been going to be sort of like a home-coming of kinsfolk when the wagon-train pulled in. He'd looked forward to it with boyish glee, counting the hours until he would see Gail, so sweet

and pretty that sight of her nearly took his breath away.

And old Jacques La Bonte, with his vast knowledge of the plains and his queer jargon, and Sime Tweedy, the runty bull-whacker, always cackling like a bantam. Tim Monahan, too, ready for a lark or a fight.

Everybody at the station knew about these folks, and Lieutenant Grummond had promised a big party.

That sound! One small, final click, indicating that the current had ebbed from the coils of the sounder, releasing the armature and letting it hit upward, under tension of its spring, against the stop.

Somewhere the wire had failed.

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CHRISTIAN whipped from his bunk, every sense alert. He grounded the line, first east; then west. This brief test revealed that the wire was all right west. The line then was open to the east of him.

A thunder squall had been booming along the hills off there. The blue-black sky was still criss-crossed with lively yellow veins.

During a storm, wire failure was often prefaced by static and stuttering impulses. But now there had been only that one abrupt *click*. Sharp and final, it was. The line had been broken—or cut.

Print sensed that it had happened much nearer Horseshoe Station than Fort Laramie. He thought of the wagon-train, of Kirkendall and Hilary Burnham.

He reported to Lieutenant Grummond. "Just give me a horse," he said. "I don't think it's far. No need of an escort. I'll fix it and be back in no time."

Since the cattleman had reported the Indian raid at the river, some ten miles north, there had been a growing feeling that the Sioux were massing for an attack on the station. Red Cloud had left the council room at Fort Laramie in a rage. Only yesterday scouting parties had sighted a large band of warriors in the hills beyond the Platte.

Kirkendall's wagon-train was close, and wide open to attack. If it became necessary for part of the garrison to go to the aid of the train, the station stood in danger of being destroyed. Lieutenant Grummond, wise in the ways and craft of the Sioux, foresaw this.

"I don't like the looks of it, Reb," he said. "I think it's a trap. If the Sioux can split the troop, there's liable to be a lot of scalps waving from sticks at the next stomp dance. When those devils start ripping down wire, look out."

"Or white men," Print said.

"You haven't forgotten those chopped poles, have you?" the lieutenant said.

"Nope, an' I ain't a-goin' to—ever."

Print Christian's lips thinned to a pale scar. Jake Taggart had said, "So ye're a telegrapher, bub?" Taggart and the other two knew he was to relieve the operator here. They thought, just because he was a kid, he'd be easy to outsmart. Mebbe he would. He had sure been a fool to blab all he knowed, but that was done now.

"The wire was cut, I reckon," he said. "It went dead that quick. But I'll find out sure enough."

"I don't like the idea of you going alone," Lieutenant Grummond said.

"I'm right smart at dodgin'," Print said. "I fooled the Yanks lots o' times in the war."

"I bet you did, at that."

"Anyhow, it's better for just me to get bushed than a whole escort."

"I admire your courage, Reb," said the other. "But remember, don't ever let those redskins take you alive."

Lieutenant Grummond routed out Micky O'Hara and ordered the trooper to saddle the best horse in the stables.

Print hurried to the telegraph office, finished dressing hastily and made ready his equipment.

There was the portable telegraph set that had belonged to the soldier-operator from Fort Mitchell, a coil of wire, a hammer, spikes, a few extra insulators and pliers. He took the regulation Smith breech-loading carbine, a Navy Colt, and stuffed his pocket with ammunition.

A little later he mounted up, there by the gate.

"If you get through to that wagon-train," instructed the lieutenant, "tell them to start for the station at once. The Indians won't attack until dawn, and they should get in."

"When I get the line fixed," Print said, "I'll give you a signal."

"I'm sorry," the officer said, "but those dots and dashes are pretty much Greek to me."

"You listen close," Print told him. "I'll make a dot-space-dot, dash-dot-dash, like this." He tapped it out slowly on the butt of the carbine, standing in the scabbard. "That means everythin's all right. It's the letters O-K."

Lieutenant Grummond smiled at the boy's earnestness. "I'll be listenin', Reb."

"You want I should ask General Connor for help if things look bad?"

"No. We'll have Nelson Story and his cowboys and the emigrants out here on the flat. I'm going to order them into the stockade for their own safety, as well as to help repel a possible attack."

"I told Kim Rawlins at the next station west," Print said, "an' the instruments are cut into the line east, so's you can hear the sounder an' relay click when I patch the wire. If I don't get it fixed—well, there just won't be no dots an' dashes."

Lieutenant Grummond and Micky O'Hara, standing stiffly at attention, saluted him then. Print Christian snapped his hand to the visor of that old Confederate cap and grinned at the soldiers.

"Luck, Reb," the lieutenant said.

"Sure, I'll say a prayer," said Micky O'Hara. "May ye have the luck o' the Irish."

Print touched spurs to his horse. Swinging past the blockhouse, he heard the voice of the sentry.

"Hang onto your hair, Galvanized Johnny!"

The Bozeman Road left the deep-rutted Oregon Trail a short distance west of Horseshoe Station, to thread its thin-worn and bloody trail into the land of the Big Horn, the Powder, the Yellowstone and the Gallatin.

Emigrants were camped near the stockade, and the talk here, as at Fort Laramie, had been of the Bozeman, of Montana gold camps and vast, fertile valleys to the north and west.

Print's glance went toward the ghostly canvas tops of the wagons. Here and there were the dying embers of camp fires. Small, yellow jewels, they seemed.

Somewhere a woman was singing, soft and low,

"We're tenting tonight on the old camp ground . . ."

Print's face was grave, his jaw set grimly, and he thought of Red Cloud and Black Horse and their red legions, hovering close.

CHAPTER SIX

Ambush!

THE young telegrapher set his horse to a steady, ground-covering canter, a lone figure in the immense night, riding the battle line of broken wires.

And yet he was not without an escort. Buckskin warriors, plainsmen, gave him the support of their phantom ranks. Bridger was there, and Bozeman and

Carson and Fremont; Buffalo Bill and Sublette.

Thunder rolled on the eastern horizon like the ruffle of war drums. The miles fell away under the strong beat of the hoofs of the big cavalry horse. Five were gone now. Six. Seven.

Eight miles, the poles counted off. Soon he should be coming to the place where Kirkendall and the others had wheeled their wagons into night corral. Two weeks had passed since he had left Laramie. It seemed years; so much had happened.

He had stern responsibilities now; he rode stirrup to stirrup with U. S. soldiers. Lieutenant Grummond called him Reb, listened to his suggestions concerning the telegraph.

Horseshoe Station was a link in the Western Union. His hand at the key was a part of it. Other telegraphers had come to know and recognize his Morse as readily as a familiar voice. He belonged.

The moon slid from behind a cloud to silver the rims of the rolling hills. Once Print pulled in to let his horse blow, and heard the hysterical laughter of a coyote, crying down the vacancy of the world.

In a canyon, at the base of a red butress, nine miles from Horseshoe Station, Print found the break in the line. He pulled up and his experienced eye took stock of the damage. No poles were down; the wire had simply been severed near the insulator of the next pole east.

Print frowned. It must have been cut. A wire didn't just fall apart of its own accord. The horse suddenly veered its head toward the deep pools of shadow at the base of the cliff, ears cocked, nostrils flaring.

Print felt the flesh crawl at the back of his neck. He eased the carbine from its holster, eared the hammer back. The click it made was the only sound.

It seemed to the young telegrapher that every nerve in his body was lumped tight at the pit of his stomach. Lieutenant Grummond had said, "I think it's a trap."

There was a flash, then, and a blasting report. The horse screamed, floundered down. Print saw the high rims reel and the earth swim crazily up to smash him. The carbine exploded as it was jolted from his hands.

There were dark shapes then, lunging forward. Print twisted onto his elbow and wrenched at his Colt. He managed one wild-flung, desperate shot before a gun-barrel slammed him on the head.

He struggled against slipping into a black abyss. A match flared, and across the spear-shaped bit of flame, Print made out the blurred face of Jake Taggart. He saw, too, the round, hateful features of Burl Irby, eyes squinted venomously.

Print choked from the sulphur fumes of the match, shook his head. Other figures were there, pale faces under hatbrims.

"It's the telegrapher, all right," a growling voice declared. That was Taggart. His breath was foul with whiskey.

Burl Irby snarled, "Where's your escort?"

"There ain't no escort," Print said.

A third man swore, and Print made out the lank form of Cass Kuder, the half-breed. "What happened to 'em?"

"Nothin' happened," Print declared. "I heard the sounder click when the line failed an' 'lowed the wire'd been cut. That meant an ambush, me an' Lieutenant Grummond figured, like the one that wiped out the repair party from Fort Mitchell that time. They're liable to need all the soldiers at the station; that's why I come alone."

"Ye're so smart somebody's liable to beat your brains out," Taggart snarled.

"I ain't scairt of you," Print heard himself saying. He was scared all right, but he'd never show the white feather to these renegades.

"Them tin soldiers saved their hides tonight," another voice said, "but they'll be Injun meat tomorrer."

That meant there was to be an attack on Horseshoe Station. Print wondered if the outlaws knew about Kirkendall's wagon-train. It couldn't be more than two or three miles away. He looked at Taggart; his voice was steady.

"You better let me fix that telegraph wire, mister."

"Shet your jaw!" the big man snarled.

It was Burl Irby who said, "What if ye don't fix it?"

"Then there'll be a troop from Fort Laramie, comin' to find what's wrong." Seemed like they'd oughta be able to hear his heart poundin'. All he wanted was about a minute at that wire, and Ed Creighton's lightnin' line would sing its warning down the miles. It would mean life for a lot of people.

♥ ♥ ♥

LIEUTENANT GRUMMOND couldn't read Morse, that was true. But thirty miles west of Horseshoe Station was Camp Marshal, with Kim Rawlins listening beside the key. Print had talked with the operator right after the wire had failed east of him.

If he could get a message to Kim Rawlins, a courier would be heading for Horseshoe Station in no time. He'd make it in two hours or less. Lieutenant Grummond would send help.

Cavalrymen would come rattling their sabers out of Laramie; they'd be here before dawn. And these brigands and the redskins would have a taste of the bullet wrath of U. S. fighting men.

If only he could maneuver to get at that dragging wire. There must be *some* way. There'd gotta be. . . .

Print became aware of the Indians then. The muddy gloom beyond was alive with them. Cass Kuder, the breed, was talking to some of them in their own jargon.

Jake Taggart spoke to Kuder. "Tell 'em no soldiers come to fix the talk-a-heap—the telegraph wire. They're afraid of the braves of Black Kettle an' Man-Afraid-of-His-Horse, an' stay in the stockade. Tell 'em they will hide in them wagons of ourn at dawn, an' go to meet the schooner train."

That would be Kirkendall's wagons, Print thought. He saw the scheme now. Kirkendall had said, "What deviltry the Injuns don't know them white hellions l'arn 'em."

Kirkendall, old Jacques La Bonte and the others would have broken corral and be strung out, wide open to attack. Taggart's covered wagons would approach unsuspected, to suddenly disgorge screaming savages and renegades. Taken by surprise, the freighters and emigrants could do little.

Too, there probably would be other red warriors skulking close by, waiting to charge in. Print thought of Gail and the other women folks; of Sime Tweedy; Tim Monahan. Seemed like he had known 'em always; they'd been grand to him.

His eyes whipped desperately toward the poles, to the thread of wire, dead, silent. He heard Taggart's throaty, hateful voice booming at Kuder, the swarthy go-between.

"Tell 'em plenty more scalps at Horseshoe Station; plenty guns; plenty hosses. Tell 'em they're goin' to ride to the stockade in white man's tepees on wheels. The gate will be open. Tell 'em to send word to the braves on the Platte. One sun an' they attack—tomorrow night at dusk."

Print learned that it had been planned to dress the renegades in the uniforms of the soldiers sent out with him to repair the line. His blue eyes turned cold, grim; his hands clenched. These men figgered he was just a kid an' didn't count.

He'd heard the scream of grapeshot and canister; he'd seen bright-gleaming bayonets bathed in red; he'd seen men die, brave men of the blue and the gray. Fear left him; he reckoned he'd show 'em that old reb cap was somethin' to respect, somethin' to back away from when the last showdown came.

Mebbe they figgered telegraphers wa'n't fightin' men, nohow. Mebbe they did. Them galvanized soldiers of the Eleventh Ohio Cavalry at Laramie hadn't never showed yeller; that brevet looey had said so. Even if he wa'n't nothin' but a brass-pounder, he guessed he'd got stuff in him, just like other Dixie men. He'd show these jiggers.

The fellers called him Galvanized Johnny, an' he was proud they did. It was kinda a chevron—a mark of high rank. . . .

Burl Irby was saying, "We'll chop down a bunch o' poles an' clean out the wire. We'll burn them emigrants' poverty schooners an' keep the Conestoga wagons; then head up the Bozeman into Montany." Whiskey had made his speech thick.

Print gingerly rubbed his head. He found his old Confederate cap and put it on. His hand touched something else, there in the dust. It was the Navy Colt. His eyes jerked around warily. Nobody was paying much attention to him just then. He thrust the gun inside of his shirt; then hoisted himself to his feet. He shook his head, swayed a little.

Taggart, Irby and Kuder were talking together, low-toned. Their faces turned toward him now, and the bearded man said, "All right, bub. Ye kin fix that wire, but if ye try anythin' smart I'll bash your skull in."

Print nodded. He wondered how much these renegades knew about the intricacies of the telegraph.

Kuder poked him with the muzzle of his rifle. "Git goin'."

PRINT CHRISTIAN unfastened his kit and the coil of wire from the saddle of the dead horse, every movement slow, deliberate, and in direct contrast to the mad whirl in his brain.

"My head hurts." He'd have to make them think he was still groggy.

"It'll hurt worse if one of them bucks uses his scalpin' knife on it," Kuder cracked.

Print fingered the telegraph set. "I gotta cut this in to find out if the line is workin'," he mumbled.

Burl Irby grabbed the portable instrument from his hands. "Ye don't have to find out nothin'—jist patch up that wire."

Print picked up the coil of wire and his pliers. A moment later he was splicing one end of the coil to the dragging strand of iron. Taggart and the others watched, jeering at his seeming awkwardness.

Print played out some slack, looped the coil over his shoulder and climbed the pole, holding the stub of the cut wire. He locked his legs and rested a little, breathing hard. Then he pulled up the slack and took a turn around the pole close to the insulator. He cut the free wire, made the other end fast and tossed down the coil.

The idea that an operator could transmit a message by making and breaking the contact between the two sides of a main line wire had evidently never entered the minds of the renegades.

Print scraped the two wire stubs with his knife until they were bright and clean. He shifted position, getting a fresh grip with his bony legs. A short distance away the Indians were hunkered down, watching, stolidly curious, now and then uttering some guttural word or grunt, or howling for firewater.

Cass Kuder had gone to pick up the portable telegraph set and was showing it to them. When he rejoined Taggart

and Irby, he said, "I told 'em this feller couldn't make medicine with the soldiers without his tick-tick."

Print sucked in his breath, stole a glance at the pale blur of faces below; then brought the two wire-ends together. A quick contact would make a dot; a longer contact a dash. The Morse characters thus formed would be crude, ragged, but an operator could make them out.

He looked down the miles, and saw John Friend in the telegraph office at Fort Laramie, Kim Rawlins at Camp Marshal, Dick Malade at Platte Bridge, Johnny Eager at Fort Mitchell.

Day or night, they were never far from their telegraph instruments, except when it was necessary to go out with a repair party. They'd likely be waiting now for the wound in the wire to be healed, for relay and sounder to spring to life with racketing Morse. Kim Rawlins, in particular, for Kim knew he'd gone out to look for the break alone.

Print made a long dash, the wire ends pressed tight. Then there were two dots, a dash-dot, a dot. That spelled l-i-n-e. He made other contacts, quick and sure. Quick as the human voice almost.

"Line cut 9 mi e HS. Sioux. Wagons. Danger. PC."

That was all.

Print's heart started hammering wildly. He'd done it! A written page could have told no more.

Each station had its call letters; each telegrapher was identified by a "sine." "9 mi e HS," would tell Kim Rawlins and the rest that the failure was nine miles east of Horseshoe Station. PC, of course, were his own initials.

Print's hands were trembling now; he could hardly make the joint that finally tied the line together. He crossed the wire stubs and wrapped the ends tight with his pliers, thus welding the break.

He was all done; the rest was up to General Connor at Fort Laramie, to Lieutenant Grummond. They'd have plenty of time to shape their battle lines.

As he slid down the pole, Print's elbow pressed against the Navy Colt inside of his shirt, and other grim thoughts took possession of him.

Lieutenant Grummond had said, "Don't ever let those redskins take you alive."

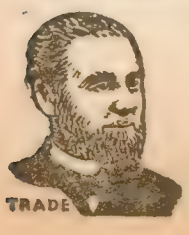
CHAPTER SEVEN

Guns Guard the Wire Trail

WHITE renegades were as bad as Injuns. Jake Taggart never intended that he should get away, Print told himself. Mebbe the bearded man figgered to turn him over to these braves—Black Kettle's warriors.

Mebbe the white men would shoot him down. Other doubts and fears crowded in. What if there was another break-

ROMEOS



Don't let your love-making be spoiled by a cough due to a cold . . . Keep Smith Brothers' Cough Drops handy. Black or Menthol, just 5¢.

Smith Bros. Cough Drops are the only drops containing VITAMIN A

Vitamin A (Carotene) raises the resistance of mucous membranes of nose and throat to cold infections, when lack of resistance is due to Vitamin A deficiency.

in the line between here and Fort Laramie? There had been a thunder storm off there. Perhaps cloudbursts had washed out poles.

Mebbe there wouldn't be any soldiers comin' from Fort Laramie. If the wire was down any place, there wouldn't have been any message flashing out, on account of he'd been workin' across a gap in the main line, instead of bein' hooked up to one side of the wire with a ground on, like when he had telegraphed for help, there east of Laramie.

What would Lieutenant Grummond do if a message did reach him—risk part of his troop in an attempt to come to the rescue of Kirkendall and leave a weakened garrison to face a possible dawn attack, or sit tight?

There were several saddle horses a short distance away. Somebody had brought them in while he had been up the pole. Print's glance went toward them. He guessed the Injuns' mounts must be back somewhere in the brush that fringed the cliff, or, perhaps, at the place where the renegades had left their wagons.

Print thought of Gail Burnham, walking beside him that day after the attack, lips tight, eyes bright and unafraid in spite of those graves behind. He thought of Sam Bissell and the Petersons, of songs around the camp fires, of gay times and sad.

Their courage never dimmed, these trail blazers of the Great Medicine Road. They believed that God shaped their destiny, and unfalteringly placed their lives in His keeping, never doubting, never questioning. . . .

Print Christian reached inside of his shirt and ripped out his .44 Colt. In a flash he jammed the muzzle, the hammer eared full back under his bony thumb, hard into the ribs of Jake Taggart.

One plains pirate would never again plot with Indians to attack and loot a wagon-train. He pulled the trigger, felt the jolt of the weapon in his sweating fist, heard Jake Taggart scream and saw him start to fall.

Too late Burl Irby bellowed a warning, lunged forward. Cass Kuder was jerking up his carbine.

Print smashed the barrel of the heavy Colt into Irby's beefy face with all of his might—a wild, back-handed swing. There hadn't been time for a shot. There was the crunch of flesh and bone, a smothered curse.

Kuder's gun blossomed like a yellow rose and a slug tore at Print's coat. It would have hit him fair, only he had been moving away under the drive of the steel springs in his spindling shanks.

Out of the graveyard quiet of this desolate night enormous confusion was unleashed. The startled cries of the Indians, the bawling voices of Taggart's men.

Other voices were crying, small voices moving with electric speed over the wire. In dim-lit telegraph offices metal tongues lashed out, setting off a kind of orderly turmoil. At Fort Laramie a bugle sounded. *Boots and saddles!*

A U. S. cavalryman left Camp Marshal, riding hard for Horseshoe Station with a message for Lieutenant Grummond. . . .

A naked figure rushed at Print Christian, tomahawk raised. The Navy Colt spilled fire straight at the Indian's heart and he crashed headlong.

Burl Irby mumbled through his smashed teeth and leveled his six-shooter. The bullet spun Print half around. He steadied himself from the shock that had hammered at his left shoulder; then drove a shot at the paunchy trader. The square-built man reeled and fell.

A horse piled past Print and he jammed his Colt into the waistband of his trousers and lunged for the saddlehorn. The fingers of his right hand held like

straining talons and he found himself being swept along in great ludicrous strides. Desperately he tried to pull himself up, and knew he'd never make it. . . .

His grip loosened. He let go and made a grab for the flapping stirrup leather. Cass Kuder fired again and missed.

Print lost his feet. His shoes were half torn off, brush burned him. A flying hoof struck his leg and something snapped, but he hung on.

Two hundred yards away the horse crashed down the bank of a gulley. The stirrup leather was torn from his hand and he hurtled over and over, to slam at last against a boulder.

For a little he lay there, limp and bleeding. Dimly he heard yells and the rapid drum of hoofs. He tried to untangle things in his whirling brain.

He crawled into a clump of brush and flattened there. Riders hammered past him. The creak of leather indicated white men. Then there were the blurred shapes of spotted Indian ponies pelting past.

Print felt for his Colt, but it was gone. He became aware of punishing agony in his right leg. It was broken above the ankle. His left shoulder was turning into a savage ache.

Riders were everywhere. Once, hoofs sprayed his hiding place with dust and flying pebbles.

The thought that they might find him filled him with panic. He'd have to get to the wagons and warn 'em, in case the soldiers didn't come.

Lightning was still flaming along the eastern horizon. Print lifted himself with his right elbow; then pitched toward the next brush clump like a twitching, broken man-size frog.

He covered a mile, flopping on his knees. He knew it was a mile because he'd counted the telegraph poles. Every move meant torture. His throat was husk dry; his mouth was full of cotton.

Each telegraph pole was a hard-won goal. Here he'd rest, his back against it, the thin hum of the wire whispering down to him. Singing wires, murmuring of far places: of Omaha, San Francisco, of Laramie and Platte Bridge and Camp Marshal.

Kinda seemed like he could almost hear the quick, sure Morse of John Friend and Kim Rawlins and Dick Malade.

An hour passed. Two. Three. However, Print Christian had long since lost all sense of time. He knew only screaming pain. That next pole east. Funny how it blurred and squirmed. . . .

The stars were sparkling waters. The poles were soldiers standing stiffly at attention as those white-topped wagons rolled past in endless parade.

How plainly he could see them now, canvas tops against the prairie sky. He could hear the wheels talking in the ruts, the shouts of the bullwhackers. Somewhere a woman was singing, *"We're tenting tonight . . ."* There were Missourians, tall Kentucky men; New Englanders—Hilary Burnham; Gail, striding along beside the oxen. . . .

♠ ♠ ♠

OUT of the night came a thin column of riders. There was the creek and clatter of gear, the orderly, steady tattoo of shod hoofs.

A low voice said, "There's the wagons."

Suddenly someone cried, "Lieutenant, look! There by that telegraph pole."

Lieutenant Grummond's arm went up. "Halt!" He swung from the saddle; bent down. "Good Lord, it's Print Christian!"

Cool water! It moistened his hot lips, spilled down his shirt.

"Hey, Galvanized Johnny!"

Print stirred, opened his eyes. He shook his head, jarring loose the cobwebs. That was O'Hara with the canteen. He saw Lieutenant Grummond, heard him saying, "Hullo, Reb. Say, I

was listening, but that Morse was too hot for an amateur to handle. I never did get it until the courier got there from Camp Marshal."

Micky O'Hara said, "Sure, an' I thought ye'd be wearin' a halo instid of a scalp by now."

"Did you see any Indians?" Print asked shakily.

"Just a dead one," Lieutenant Grummond said, "back here near your horse, and two white men."

"That was Jake Taggart an' the feller they called Irby," Print said. He told what had happened.

"They'd been scalped," the lieutenant said. "I guess Black Kettle's braves thought they had made bad medicine with the talk-a-heap chief." He looked at O'Hara. "Give me a hand; we'll take him to the wagons."

"The wagons?" Print said.

"Sure," Lieutenant Grummond said. "They're not a hundred yards away."

Print Christian grinned weakly, closed his eyes. "Reckon everythin's all right then."

The cavalry troop from Fort Laramie arrived in the cool hour before dawn. A surgeon was with them. He dressed the telegrapher's shoulder wound, bandaged his raw, bloody knees and set the bone in his shattered leg.

"The kid's all rawhide and guts," he said, bobbing his head. "Give him a little time to rest and he'll be as good as new."

Out of the rain of torment, Print heard another voice then, soft it was, choked a little. "Print. It's me. Gail."

He forced his lids open, stared at her —grinned. Pretty swell, findin' her there. Her eyes were bright with pride of him —bright and unafraid.

Somewhere he heard Kirkendall's voice giving the command to break corral. Old Jacques La Bonte's bull whip cracked. Oxen strained into their yokes, and once more the wagon-train was rolling west on the Oregon Trail.

THE END

Statement of the ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Acts of Congress of August 24, 1912, and March 3, 1933, of Ace High Western Stories, published bi-monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1941. State of New York, county of New York, ss. Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Harold S. Goldsmith, who having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of the Ace High Western Stories, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Fictioneers Inc., 210 East 43rd Street, New York, N. Y. Editor, Henry Steeger, 210 East 43rd Street, New York, N. Y. Managing Editor, none. Business Manager, Harold S. Goldsmith, 210 East 43rd Street, New York, N. Y. 2. That the owner is: Fictioneers Inc., 210 East 43rd Street, New York, N. Y., Henry Steeger, 210 East 43rd Street, New York, N. Y., Harold S. Goldsmith, 210 East 43rd Street, New York, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: none. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner, and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest, direct or indirect, in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. Harold S. Goldsmith, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 29th day of September, 1941. Eva M. Walker, Notary Public, New York County Clerk's No. 26, Register's No. 2-W-178. (My commission expires March 30, 1942.) [Seal]—Form 3526—Ed. 1933.

"You double-crossing sot!" he snarled, and slammed his right elbow into the bartender's jaw.

Over a hundred torturing, law-hounded miles, Rocky Ringo, framed killer, outrode the law—for a last chance to trade ten years of prison for his life!

OVER THE HILL WITH DEATH

By FRED GIPSON

ROCKY RINGO had heard about cold-nerved gents who stalked danger without turning a hair; but Rocky was not one of them. He crept through the grass on all-fours, under cover of darkness, his heart hammering double-quick, his breath coming in short gasps. Rocky was jumpy as a Mexican bean and would have been the last one to deny it.

To the north a rain storm roared. A violent head wind preceded it, howling across the brushland, twisting the chaparral and showering Rocky's back with dry mesquite bean pods. Lightning flared. He had to hurry. The storm would be waking the sheriff.

But for the occasional flash of lightning, the night was as black as the inside of a cow with her lights drilled out. Rocky couldn't see the horses. He could only hear the muffled stamp of their hoofs. The storm was making them restless.

His face touched a stake rope. He rose to his feet and followed it, hand over hand, speaking softly to the horse.

A lightning bolt struck with a blinding flare. It exploded like a bombshell. It shattered the trunk of a post-oak to the right of Rocky. Heavy chunks of green wood hummed over his head. Whizzing twigs and bits of bark burned the side of his body and stung his face. The report was deafening.

In that paralyzing second of light, Rocky had seen the horse before him rear high in fright and fall back against the rope. He felt the rope part behind him. The light went out. He heard the horse crash into dead brush. Blindly, desperately, Rocky charged the fallen animal.

A flying hoof knocked his feet from under him. He fell across the horse. The beast squealed in terror, lunged to its feet. But Rocky was astride it now. He had both fists full of mane. He lay low, his head ducked to keep brush from gouging out his eyes. The horse quit the country at a dead run.

Behind, Rocky heard a startled shout. A Colt barked. Lead chunked with a solid *thuck* into flesh. A horse screamed.

In spite of his desperate predicament, Rocky chuckled. "Losing a prisoner's enough to make old Jeff Banta foam at the mouth," he reflected, "but when that old longhorn sheriff finds out he's shot his own horse, he'll be mad enough to bite himself!"

The runaway horse plunged into the night. Rocky kept reaching down for the dragging stake rope. If that rope happened to catch on something solid, it would spill a good man and a spooked horse like a sack of oats. Then he had it, and was hauling back on the horse, calling, "Whoa, boy! Easy, now!" in a calm voice that in no way expressed his true feeling.

The fugitive realized he had about as much chance of pulling down a boogered horse with a neck rope as he'd have of checking a fast freight with a piggin' string. But strangely, the horse slowed. When he'd brought it to a halt, dropped down and slipped a half-hitch on its under jaw, Rocky understood why. In the darkness, he'd picked out Banta's old rawboned pack-horse, a pet of the sheriff's.

Rocky patted the heaving barrel and then the neck of the captured black. "You're a rough un, pardner," he said. "But I reckon you've got a heap of bottom or the sheriff wouldn't have you out on a man hunt."

But when he vaulted astride the stolen mount again he groaned. "Damned if your backbone wouldn't split a hailstone!" he exclaimed.

The storm broke with a roar. Rain lashed and blinded him. But it was also covering his trail!

♠ ♠ ♠

ROCKY felt like the losing end of a dogfight when he rode into the town of Llano just after nightfall the following evening. His clothes were tattered and sweat-stained. His startlingly blue eyes, under a shock of black hair, were red-rimmed from lack of sleep. He ached in every joint and muscle of his long, pantherish body. The day's blistering sun had shrunk his boots till he was certain some of his toes were pinched off. And a twenty-hour ride, bareback on a horse with a backbone like a ridgepole, had been discouraging, to say the least. Rocky had ridden every square inch of his mount's back, from ears to tail, since the night before. There just wasn't a comfortable spot on the old crowbait!

"Much more of this," he grunted, "and I'll be split to my chin."

He pulled up his plodding mount under a wide-spread live oak at the edge of town. A stranger couldn't afford to ride in on a barebacked horse. Folks would get curious and ask questions.

And Rocky didn't want folks asking him questions. He wanted to do the asking himself. He wanted to locate a couple of poker-playing polecats who knew more than they'd told on the witness stand about the back-shooting and robbing of Lem Ferris, foreman of the Jinglebob outfit at Eldorado. A biased court had convicted Rocky of that crime on circumstantial evidence. But he wasn't serving his time.

Not yet. He'd made his escape on the way to the penitentiary; and when that old trail-hound Sheriff Banta finally got the drop on him back yonder on the Pedernales, he'd taken advantage of the night's storm to escape again.

But every time he thought how close he'd come to being shut up for the next ten years of his life, he grew weak all over and shivered like a dog in the wet.

He shivered now, while he staked his mount. But it was mostly from weakness and hunger.

"If I don't feed before long," he grumbled, "my belly'll think my throat's been cut."

The town sprawled atop a rocky knoll overlooking the Llano River. Here and there lanes of light lay across the hard-packed streets. Rocky avoided these lights as much as possible. He moved along on painful feet, trying to appear indifferent.

It looked like a peaceful town, but Rocky was fast learning that no town remained peaceful long after he entered it. There were too many dodgers out with his picture topping off a two thousand-dollar reward sign, reading "Dead or Alive!"

Rocky thought: *It's a plumb caution how many people want two thousand dollars bad enough to shoot a man!*

Light from the Granite Rock Saloon and Restaurant spilled out above batwing doors. It revealed a row of saddle horses standing slack-hipped at the hitchrail. Rocky could feel his scalp drawing at the back of his neck as he approached. He sure did hate to step inside that place.

Yet he had to eat; and a man never could expect to start the trail of two mangy coyotes like Slade Hartly and Rod Garnett if he didn't nose for their scent around their natural watering places. He'd bet plenty that some time or other Slade and Rod had caroused in this booze dive.

At the saloon door he halted a moment to weigh the noise inside. He looked up and down the street, sighed, hitched his gun loose in his scabbard and knuckled back a swinging door.

A dozen men were in the big room, some at the bar, some playing poker. Their eyes lifted as he entered. They were cold, unwelcoming eyes, it seemed to Rocky. His own glance swept the room hastily, then probed each individual as he strode toward the bar.

"What'll it be, mister?"

The head of the prosperously-paunched bartender was as unsullied with hair as the bottles he juggled.

"Make it rye," Rocky ordered, "and tell the grub-spoiler to slap a steak in the skillet—one about as thick as a elephant's foot."

The bartender reached languidly for a bottle and glass, then waddled off toward the kitchen. Rocky could feel his toe-nails curl when the first slug of liquor slapped bottom in his empty stomach. The second stiffened his spine.

"Better make that a double order," he called.

When the hairless bartender returned, Rocky asked casually, "Know anything about a couple of gents by the name of Slade Hartley and Rod Garnett? Hear tell they've drifted down this way."

"Might," the bartender said. "Friends of yours?"

"We've played poker together," Rocky admitted. He didn't like the bartender's sleepy eyes.

A little bow-legged puncher with cotton eyebrows and a genial smile had one foot on the rail beside Rocky's. "Why, I know them gents," he offered. "They're line-riding for old J. B. Slaughter."

Rocky controlled with effort the surge of fierce elation that swept through him. "How would a man locate 'em?" he questioned with studied carelessness.

"Easy," said Bow Legs. "Their shack's right in the fork Comanche Creek makes when she joins the Llano. Up in the red granite country."

"Much obliged," said Rocky. "Have a drink?"

"Thanks," said Bow Legs. "I've had a couple already. Any more and there'll be rattlesnakes bedding with me tonight." He grinned again and pigeoned-toed toward the door.

Rocky poured himself another one. He needed it to relax his nerves. *Now I'm getting somewhere,* he thought.

Just how he aimed to make the two killers confess their crime and clear him of the guilt, he didn't know. But he'd figure out something.

"Look, pard," grunted the bartender in a low, confidential tone. "Here's something that might pop your eyeballs."

Rocky looked. On the bar lay one of the dodgers with his picture!

♣ ♣ ♣

ROCKY'S blood turned to water. For a second he was stunned. Then his hand dipped for his gun. The bartender's piggish face blanched at the wild light which leaped into the young puncher's eyes.

"Easy! Easy!" he gasped in a whisper.

Rocky fought for control.

The bartender was frightened now. His words tumbled over each other in their hurry to be uttered. "Giving you a break!" he croaked, drawing back. "Others might recognize you, too! I'd ease out. Forget them steaks!"

Rocky stared at him, his blood pounding in his ears. Was this bloated bartender really trying to give him a break? If so, why? But then, why not? Maybe he, too, knew what it was to be hounded by the law!

"Thanks, pard!" Rocky dropped a crumpled banknote on the bar, the last cent he had. "Keep the change. Maybe I can return the favor some of these days."

He turned slowly, to make a casual exit. Then bells of caution jangled. But they came too late. The hard muzzle of a scattergun jammed between his shoulders, sending chills racing up and down his spine.

"Reach, Rocky Ringo!" The voice of the bartender was hoarse and loud. "I'll collect me that two thousand on a killer!"

Rocky flashed a glance at the loafers about the big room. All had looked up, their eyes widening at the play. Chairs rasped against the floor. Some were coming to their feet.

Here it is again! Rocky thought.

He dropped. The shotgun roared overhead. A chair hopped crazily. Splinters and buckshot slammed into the opposite wall. Rocky shot to his feet again, driving the gun muzzle aside with his left hand.

"You double-crossing sot!" he snarled, and slammed his right elbow into the bartender's jaw.

The man dropped like an axed steer. Cat-like, Rocky leaped over the bar. His bootheels landed in the bartender's paunch, but Rocky was saving his apologies. He ducked low, racing for the end of the bar.

There he chanced all on surprise and speed. He rounded the corner of the bar at a dead run. He whooped like a Comanche and dived headlong for the batwings. He landed on a shoulder, rolled, and slammed out into the night.

A hail of lead splintered the batwings as they swung to behind him. More shots and shouts stimulated speed. Rocky ducked into the first alley and headed for his horse, traveling like a road runner after a striped lizard. If his boots pinched now, it was nothing compared to the pinch out of which he'd just squeezed.

Under the liveoak, Rocky snatched the tie-rope loose from a low-hanging branch.

"Sorry you missed out on the feed bag, pardner," he puffed at the black. "But so did I. Seems we've stirred up a bumblebee's nest. Reckon it's best we stack a little scenery back of us again."

He was fitting the half-hitch around the

black's jaw when a voice called from the darkness behind him. "Lift 'em, Rocky!"

Rocky wilted. "Oh, hell! Is that you again, Sheriff?"

"It's me, all right," Jeff Banta admitted in a slow, even voice. "Don't turn, Rocky. Just lift 'em, like I said, and back up till I can reach that gun."

Horses came pounding down the slope. Rocky thought: *They sure do keep a man on the jump.* He lifted his hands and stepped back, bunching his muscles for the coming effort.

"You know, Sheriff," he chuckled, "if your ears hung down and you'd bawl on trail now and then, not a man in Texas could tell you from a bloodhound."

The sheriff grunted. Rocky whirled. His hand sent Banta's gun spinning. The other finished the circle in a drive that connected with the sheriff somewhere about the lobe of the ear. Banta hit the ground with a grunt.

Rocky made a flying leap for his razor-backed mount, landed astride and raked hair with both spurs. The pack-horse squealed, reared, then stretched out, running like a scared wolf. When he plunged off a ten-foot bank into the Llano, the only part of Rocky touching him was a hand clutched in his mane. Ringo was scared.

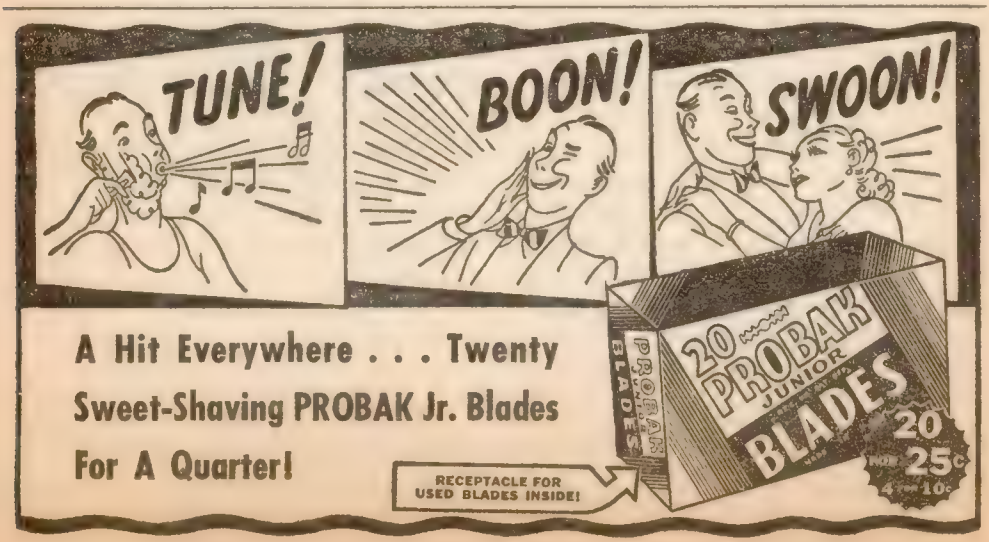
They knocked water high. Both went under. But when they went out on the far bank, Rocky had his rear-galling seat astride the black again.

They tore into the brush. Orange flames stabbed at them from the opposite side of the river. Slugs whistled past Rocky's ears.

The fugitive swung one leg across the withers of his mount, sitting crossways to ease the discomfort of that ridge-pole back. His dripping clothes clung to his flesh and made him shiver in the night air. He sighed. "For a gent who's used to about one wash-up a month, I'm taking baths mighty regular here lately."

♦ ♦ ♦

DAYLIGHT found Rocky following a cow trail that led up the river. He traveled afoot now, and barefooted. His toe-pinching, water-shrunk boots were tied together and hung across the weary pack-horse he led. The sharp-ridged back of the old horse had worn Rocky's hindquarters raw as beef liver. But he was afraid to turn the animal loose. He didn't know when he might need to make a quick get-away. And in spite of his appearances, that old horse could sure travel.



The pulverized trail sand was soft and cool to Rocky's feet; but all the travel-weary puncher could think of was those two steaks he'd left sizzling at the Granite Rock kitchen the night before. He felt drawn as a bitch wolf suckling pups, but prospects of eating soon were mighty slim, he had to admit.

But it's still better than sitting in a cell and picking lice all day, he guessed.

He traveled through rolling country of scrub oak and mesquite, where scattered upthrusts of granite lifted sharp fangs that glistened in the light of the rising sun. On rounding a heap of boulders, he halted. Yonder stood a mud-daubed log shack nestling back in the curve of the river valley. Smoke curled from the chimney. A mongrel dog rushed out from under the front steps and dared Rocky to come closer.

Rocky hesitated. His common sense urged him to retreat and do it fast His stomach insisted that he risk everything for grub. His stomach just about had the scrap won when a comely Mexican woman appeared at the door. She scolded the dog with a torrid flow of Spanish. Rocky's sense of relief almost overpowered him.

Rocky knew Mexicans. They were friendly folk who didn't ask questions. He stepped forward, smiling a smile calculated to win him a cup of coffee, at least. He swept off his hat and bowed grandly. *"Buenas dias, señora!"* he greeted.

A startling number of bright-eyed children came to peek at him from around their mother's skirts. Some stood at the corners of the dwelling. Rocky added in exaggerated wonder: *"Ay, de mí—Los niños!* So many and such beautiful babies! And the mother so young!"

His flattery and Spanish did it. In no time, he was inside the cabin, sipping sweetish Mexican coffee and casting admiring glances at his smiling, broad-hipped hostess. She amply repaid his flattery with stacks of *tortillas,* slices of baked *frijoles,* wild honey and damn fine butter.

Twenty minutes of wolfing such delicacies, and the starved puncher leaned back, stuffed as a weed-bloated pig. He was suddenly sleepy. But he knew old Jeff Banta too well to risk that indulgence. The sheriff would be picking up his trail again this morning. And he had to stay ahead of the sheriff a little longer. Long enough to clean out a den of coyotes on up the river. Come hell or high water, Rocky aimed to clean out that den of coyotes!

He shuddered, however, when he thought of mounting Banta's pack-horse again. Then an idea that made him want to laugh outright hit him. Instead, he allowed the corners of his mouth to droop while his eyes grew sad.

"It is the wife, señora," he explained to his hostess, who had noted instantly his forlorn aspect. "She lies in bed at Mason, near death with the fever. Word came to me last night. I left my freight wagon and rode this horse all night. But he is a poor traveler and I have no saddle."

The Mexican woman's lips quivered with sympathy, and Rocky felt for the first time that the pen was exactly where he belonged.

But I've got to have a saddle, he rationalized. *I've just got to!*

He not only got the saddle but a good clear-footed bay horse that stepped like a cat. Added to that were the prayers of the emotional Señora Guterriz and a huge bottle of some foul-smelling weed brew that he was assured would cool the fever of his fictitious wife.

Struggling into his boots, Jeff mounted the decorated Mexican saddle and tried to avoid the eyes of the kindly woman. They were too full of tears and pity.

The last few weeks had made Rocky pretty callous, but now his nerve nearly failed him. He spoke gruffly: "My friend Jeff Banta told me of your gracious hospitality, señora," he said. "He will be

along soon to pay for the things I have taken. Tell him this is a fine horse and saddle I ride and that they are worth many dollars. He will pay."

"Señor, it is nothing!" exclaimed the woman. "Nothing! Hurry to your beautiful wife and God go with you! I shall pray for her. *Adios!*"

Rocky rode off, feeling like a sheep-killing dog. *Lots of folks wouldn't admit it,* he thought, *but there's a heap of white in Mexicans.*

Then suddenly he rocked with laughter. Old Jeff would be ready to pry up hell and prop it up with a chunk of rock when asked to pay for this outfit!

♥ ♥ ♥

ROCKY rode steadily up-river. He kept a sharp watch back along the trail he followed. Noon came and the hot sun blistered his back where a dead snag had torn away his shirt and jacket the night before. He rode more slowly now and pulled up on every ridge he crossed to study the country down-river. He was getting uneasy when he topped a high rise and looked back, to catch a glimpse of a rider rounding a boulder heap less than a mile behind.

"Damn!" he exclaimed. "I didn't aim to let that old trail-hound get that close on my tail!"

He touched spurs to the fretting bay. The wiry animal sprang away, then steadied into a mile-eating gallop.

The shadows were growing long when Rocky's bay dropped into the gravel bed of Comanche Creek and clambered up the steep bank on the other side. A shack sat back from the river apiece, against a wall of broken granite. Chinaberry trees hugged it closely on the north side. Rocky rode up, making no attempt at secrecy.

Here's where I check up on my rabbit's foot, he thought, and swung down.

The shack door jerked back abruptly. A scarecrow figure with a vulture face stood in the opening. Black eyes, deadly as a rattler's, looked down at Rocky.

"Howdy, Slade," Rocky greeted.

Slade said, "What're you doing out of the pen?"

Rocky's gun hand twitched, but he made no move for the Colt at his side. "Just coyotin' around, Slade." He grinned cheerfully at the killer. "Hunting a little evidence."

"This ain't a healthy country for back-shooting killers," warned Slade.

Rocky looked the puncher up and down, as if taking note of the flesh on a cow. "You don't seem to be packing a heap of tallow," he agreed.

Slade ignored the implication. His eyes flicked past Rocky, then back. "I reckon a smart gent like you can round up a heap of evidence, all right," he sneered.

Rocky felt, more than heard, the slight movement behind him.

He looked straight into Slade's eyes. "Enough to hang you and Rod Garnett," he lied—then ducked.

The heavy blow from behind peeled the side of his head and struck him solid across the shoulder. His collar bone snapped. He reeled, blind with pain. His knees buckled slowly and he sank to the ground. The bulldog jaw and leering eyes of Rod Garnett swam before him. . . .

They had him inside the shack, his feet doubled back and his hands lashed to them, when the fog cleared from Rocky's eyes. His head throbbed. Sharp pains stabbed his shoulder. He didn't know how long he'd been unconscious, but he hoped it had been a long time. He lay on his side, his face turned to the wall, so that he was unable to see his captors.

Garnett was speaking. "I say take the runny-nosed squirt to Eldorado and turn him over to Banta," he growled. "That reward would look mighty good stacked up on top the other."

"Dunno," objected Slade in an uneasy

voice. "He claims he's got evidence that'll hang us. Be safer to make wolf-bait outta his carcass."

Garnett snorted. "How'n the hell could he get evidence?"

"How'n the hell did he get loose?" Slade countered.

The two were silent a moment, as if pondering the matter. There was the *plop* of a released cork and the gurgle of liquor leaping eagerly down an open gullet.

Rocky listened so hard he thought his ears would curl. He could hear nothing he wanted to hear. He thought: *Either way they decide, I'm a gone duck."*

"Look," said Garnett. "He's got no evidence. We're the only ones who knowed he lost that watch of his to Ferris in that game. We taken it out of Ferris' pocket and dropped it beside his body. Looked like Ringo had dropped it there after back-shooting Ferris. That's the way the jury saw it. Ringo swore we seen him lose that watch to Ferris. We swore we didn't know nothing about no watch. They took our word and hung the job on him, just like we had it figured. What other evidence is there? Let's collect that bounty."

Sweat popped out on Rocky's face. He itched where he couldn't scratch. *They're giving down the milk, like I figured,* he thought. *But I rode too damned fast!*

He heard a chair scrape the floor. "Well," said Slade, "I wish to hell he hadn't got loose."

"I'll bet you do, Slade!"

Rocky Ringo yelled. He couldn't help it. That was old Trail Hound Banta's voice at the window!

Window glass shattered and tinkled to the floor. The black muzzle of a Colt poked through, backed up by the grim features of Jeff Banta.

"Freeze, you dirty—"

The blast of his own gun cut off Banta's words. Garnett had made a try. He staggered now. Slade's gun cleared and roared. The sheriff's hat left his head. The old lawman triggered again.

Garnett's beefy body slumped suddenly to the floor. Slade, with a bullet hole between his eyes, pitched across him, his bootheels drumming the boards. Rocky whooped again. Then he was sick.

"Damn!" he gagged. "I died five times in the last four minutes."

Banta grunted, came around to the door and entered. He squatted beside Rocky and began untying him. "You mean," he said, "that you made killer bait out of yourself on purpose?"

"Had to," grinned Rocky, his spirits soaring. "You kept me choused to death. Couldn't get no rest."

"Well, I reckon this clears you, all right, boy," Banta said. "But you sure had guts to pull a trick like that."

Freed, Rocky sat up, his head still pounding. "If you think that took guts," he scoffed, "you oughta try straddling that danged old pack-horse of yours bareback for a hundred miles. Hell, I'd rather ride a butcher knife. . . . How much boot did the Señora Guterriz want on that swap I made for this bay? He's sure a stepper."

The faded eyes of the stocky old sheriff suddenly glared. "Señora Guterriz!" he grouched. "Hell, I had to deal with the old man. Charged me a hundred and fifty difference."

Rocky came to his feet, giddy, but laughing. He leaned on the sheriff for support. "I'll settle with you when I get back to my little spread."

The grizzled oldster shrugged. "Forget it, boy. Worth double that and more to see you cleared of this frame-up. Anyhow, I can maybe pad my expense account a little. . . . Got anything to drink? I've chased you till I'm running a fever."

"A fever!" exclaimed Rocky, his eyes flashing with mischief. "I've got just the thing to cool it. Try a slug out of that big bottle in my Mexican saddle pocket."

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GUNMAN'S HOLIDAY

By JOHN G. PEARSOL

CHAPTER ONE

With Gun and Torch

BUD BRANDON had been drunk. Up until the first shot had shattered the stillness in the little cabin, to send old Buck Ford toppling backward with a spreading stain darkening the front of his faded blue shirt, all this had been a hazy, whiskey-filmed dream.

But the shot jarred him, brought him up from the corner where he'd crouched, red-eyed and ragged, a young man who had grown old in a few short months; a brawny-shouldered cattleman, now stooped, skinny and pale; gone completely to hell in that short space of time between the breaking of spring and the coming of summer.

Up in the cabin in the Terlingua hills Bud Brandon stood now on shaking legs, his nerves jumpy, his heart hammering hard in his breast, staring with bleary eyes at the fallen Ford.

A rousing action-novelette of a gunman who tried to come back—on the trail of no return

Black hate, born of a drunkard's vengeful dreams, goaded Bud Brandon on to war for supremacy of a rangeland kingdom. But when the guns of nester friends and tinhorn foes alike were turned upon him, he realized that might alone doesn't make the right — and, to square himself, rode forth alone to die in a six-to-one Boothill showdown!

The faint light from a round silver moon sifted in through the glassless window to show the gray of Buck's seamed, worry-lined face, the glassiness of his dead eyes. The stench of death was in the room.

Pete Gramley, a nester neighbor of Buck Ford's, cursed hoarsely and started toward the window. Jim Herne grabbed a rifle, took a quick step toward the door. Young Brandon raised a shaking, palsied hand.

"Wait!" he called hoarsely.

The urgency in his whiskey-husked voice stopped them. They turned and stared at him.

"That's Big Tom Royal, out there," Brandon said quickly. "He's going to kill us all. I know it because he had me bring you up here. I know, now, that's what he

Cull, gun in hand, said coldly, "You nester clodhoppers leave him alone."

wanted. He put me up to it. He told me to get *all* the nesters; to tell 'em I'd learned it was Norge, the outlaw, who was stealin' their cattle; that I'd heard Norge make a date with somebody I didn't know to meet him here in this cabin tonight.

"He told me that was the only way to do it, because the Basin was so near to war that he couldn't talk to any of you. He said he'd put a business proposition up to you here tonight."

Bud Brandon passed a shaky hand across his eyes. He went on, misery in his husky voice. "But he lied. I was too drunk to put two and two together. I didn't know what he was up to. Now I do. He thinks all the nesters are here. He thinks he can kill us all, and have it blamed on Norge, because you gents have told your women folks you were goin' out after Norge. When they find you dead, Norge will be blamed. And it's my fault. I'm a damned murderer!"

For a moment there was no sound; the silence was heavy. The hard, accusing stares of Jim Herne and Pete Gramley struck Brandon with an almost physical impact. Suddenly Pete Gramley cursed fiercely, swung up a gun.

"You drunken skunk!" he grated. "I'm gonna—"

Jim Herne struck up the gun. "Don't kill him, Pete," he said softly. "After all, he's—he's just no good. Mebby he didn't know what he was doin'. An' mebby we'll need another gun to help finish this fight."

Gramley slowly lowered his gun. Carefully, Jim Herne stepped to the side of the window.

"Royal!" he called. "We know it's you out there! What do you want?"

After a second's silence Tom Royal's booming voice banged out into the night. "Nothing you can give me, Herne. You had your chance to clear out. I offered to buy your places and you refused all my offers. You started to fight me. So now I'm cleaning you out. I'll take what I want!"

♥ ♥ ♥

THEN it was quiet. Jim Herne, stepping back from the window edge, said to Gramley, "That's all I wanted to know, Pete. It's him. Bud's right. We're gonna die. But maybe we can make it cost him. Maybe we can make it cost him so much it won't be worth it to him."

Selecting a spot on the floor lighted by the moon, Herne hunkered down and, taking a notebook from his pocket, began to write in it with a stub of pencil.

"What you doin'?" Gramley said.

Herne said, "I'm writin' a letter. I'm gonna put this all down; that Royal and not Norge is out there. I'm gonna convict Royal of murder if there's a way to get this book into anybody's hands that's honest. I'll leave it here, on a shelf, where somebody will find it. If he don't burn the house it'll hang him!"

This is what the man wrote:

Dear Son, Dan:

We're up here, me and Pete Gramley and Bud Brandon, in the old line shack cabin in the Terlinguas. Tom Royal and his gunmen are outside. I know it is him because I just talked to him. He says he's gonna kill us and take the basin. He thinks that all the nesters are here because he told Bud Brandon to round us all up so he could make us a business proposition. Tom Royal didn't remember that tonight is the night of the big dance at Rodeo City, and that most of the young folks and some of the old ones would be there. Bud, being drunk as usual, didn't get to us to tell us about it till after most everybody left for the dance. So me and Pete and Buck Ford was the only ones to come. That was just luck. I am glad it worked out that way. Royal has just killed Buck Ford. I don't know how long the rest of us can last, but Tom Royal will know he's had a fight. You take good care of your mother.

Your pap,
Jim Herne.

A gun yammered out in the darkness, its echoes shuddering away among the

hills as Jim Herne rose and put the notebook on a shelf. He stayed there for a moment, his arm stretched up, his body stiff and straight. Then suddenly he crumpled to the floor, folding up like a length of chain.

Gramley, after one long look at Herne, knelt beside the window; his rifle snapped its high-pitched voice out into the night. The guns ringing the cabin began to clatter and snarl.

Slowly, moving as though in a dream, young Bud Brandon went to Jim Herne's body, lifted a Colt from the dead man's holster. From the edge of the door, he began to fire. He moved as though he were a mechanical thing, with no expression on his dissipated face. His red-rimmed eyes looked at the swirling powdersmoke as though it were a screen upon which he could visualize the seething thoughts that crowded his fevered brain.

Royal. Tom Royal. God, how he hated that man. Yet he'd slaved for him, doing his bidding, conniving with him, a cog in Royal's crooked schemes, while he dulled his brain with whiskey. There on the smoke screen in front of him he could see now the thing that had brought about his downfall.

Drunken Jigger Moore, the son of Sheriff Jake Moore, had picked a fight. Bud saw the old sheriff slapping his son in the face, taking his gun, taking Bud Brandon's gun, too. Then, later, Royal's gun-slick, Cull, coming up to Bud.

"Young Jigger's got another gun," Cull had said. "He's layin' for you. Take this, but don't use it unless you have to."

Then Jigger Moore had come stumbling out of an alley, a gun in his hand. "I'm gonna kill yuh!" he had mumbled. "I'm . . . "

Then the shot. The crowd. The startling, unbelievable fact that Jigger Moore didn't have a gun. Tom Royal, peering at Bud Brandon with hidden mockery in his eyes, saying, "It's too bad you made that mistake, ain't it? If the sheriff ever finds out you killed his kid you're a goner, Bud. But trust me. I won't ever tell. I know you *thought* he had a gun. Now . . ."

Then the whiskey to drown the bitterness of the things he had done for Tom Royal. The memory of his wife, Susan, watching him with grief-filled eyes as he went his sure, swift way to hell, afraid to face the lies he knew Tom Royal would tell if it ever came to be known that he had killed Jigger Moore. Afraid of a trial, of prison, or a rope; afraid of losing Susan. . . .

But he did lose her. She left him. Now all he had was his memories, his whiskey, his wild, undying hate for Royal. Now, at last, he had a gun in his hand, trying to kill Tom Royal before he himself died. But now all chance of Royal ever being brought to justice for his crooked deeds rested in a notebook on a shelf in the cabin, because Bud Brandon didn't believe he had a chance. He was as good as dead.

The bullets swarmed into the cabin. Brandon's gun clicked on an empty. He took another from beside the dead Buck Ford. He heard Pete Gramley moan, heard the hollow thud of his body as Pete toppled backward. He heard the crash of his own gun and smelled the powdersmoke and felt the sear of a bullet as it slashed through his side. But he kept on fighting.

Then Tom Royal's fog-horn voice boomed out, directing his men, telling them to fire the shack. A dim form darted forward out of the darkness. Bud fired at it—and missed. Fire flickered from around the corner of the house. Smoke rolled about the house corner in a billowing cloud, blinding Bud's eyes, choking him. . . .

Suddenly he realized that it was quiet. The shooting had stopped. The crackle of the fire was the only sound. Then he knew he was lost, that Tom Royal had

won, as he always won. Soon the fire would get him. Soon it would consume Jim Herne's little book on the shelf.

Stumbling blindly through the smoke, Bud Brandon made his way to the shelf. Stuffing the notebook in his pocket, he groped about on the floor till his hands found another gun. He checked it and found it loaded. He moved to the door by feeling his way along the walls. He took a step outside, coughing, choking, praying for a glimpse of Tom Royal.

He heard voices calling from beyond Royal's fighting lines. "Wait! Watch! Get 'em as they come out!"

He took a few more steps and the smoke rolled with him, shielding him; enveloping him in a cloud. He began to run. A man fired at him and missed. Brandon laughed as he raced on, wild hope coming to him in swift, rushing surges.

♠ ♠ ♠

IT SEEMED as though all the guns in creation were slamming sound at him. Something like a giant club struck him in the back and knocked him flat. The world, a crazy, whirling thing, spun about as men rushed here and there, searching for him.

Perhaps it was luck, the luck that sometimes comes to a man who has never had any lucky breaks. The tricky hand of Fate, or some unexplainable thing, made them pass him by. He lay there, sick, stunned, easy prey for their guns had they only seen him.

Gradually the night quieted and only the distant wail of a lobo was in the air; and that thin, unwavering column of smoke rising up into the moon-silvered sky to tell where a line shack had been, a momentary monument to the three men who had died there in the flames.

Slowly, Bud Brandon rose to his feet. A flickering flame in his eyes, a stubborn set to his jaw, he began a slow march toward Rodeo City. Each step was an effort. He felt like a walking dead man, a man with a bullet in his back smiling tightly as he strode uncertainly along. A drunken bum with a bright light of resolve in his eyes. A man who had suddenly found a way to even a score with a gent he hated more than anything on earth; a man who carried the fate, the very life, of Big Tom Royal in his hip pocket. Everything Tom Royal possessed depended on what was written by Jim Herne in that little book. And Bud Brandon had it!

Carrying Tom Royal's life in his pocket! That one thought alone kept Bud Brandon going, kept his lead-heavy feet pushing through the sand, kept his head up. No rest. No stops. No thought of failure. Just hate. Revenge. A vision of Big Tom Royal's life ruined as Bud Brandon's had been ruined. . . .

Up Rodeo City's single dusty street in the golden blaze of a new-born sun he trudged, staggering, stumbling, smiling crookedly. From the walk an old, stooped figure, a Mexican named Miguel Chavez, stepped and touched his arm.

"You, mi amigo, are hurt," Miguel said. "I will help you. I owe you much, remember? You—"

"You owe me nothing," Bud Brandon gasped. "But watch me closely. If I fall, pick me up and take me to the banker, Jerome Dawson."

"Si, I will do that," Miguel agreed.

One faltering step after another. Then the door to Dawson's house was there, with Dawson answering a knock.

"An envelope, Dawson, for this." Brandon held up the notebook.

After a searching glance at Brandon's pale face, Dawson brought an envelope. Bud slipped the book in it.

"Write my name on it," he said huskily. "If I die, open it. If I disappear, open it. But, until then, keep it. I'll be

seeing you." Then he was reeling away.

The march to Big Tom Royal's saloon was a nightmare. His strength was failing, weakness was assailing him at each faltering step, his breath was coming in painful gasps as a tortured heart labored in his heaving breast. In the saloon he moved the length of the bar, a dozen pairs of eyes on him. Men he knew to be murderers were watching him; the gunmen who had been with Tom Royal out there at the line shack narrowing their eyes as he marched unsteadily past. Chavez followed.

Then Tom Royal looked up from his desk in the little room off the barroom. His eyes widened. Then he smiled wickedly. "So you made it," he said. "You were a fool! You should have stayed there and died."

Unsteadily, Bud Brandon pushed the door shut behind him, shutting out Chavez. Like an automaton he moved to the desk, gripped its edges fiercely to keep from falling. His bloody grimace of a smile matched Tom Royal's for cruelty. His voice was a husky, pain-filled whisper. He shook his head.

"You're the fool, Royal," he grated. "I've got you just where you had me. Jim Herne wrote a note out there. I've got it. He named you as a murderer. He told about talking to you. I told him all I knew. I put the book away. Somebody has it. If I die it will be opened. If I disappear it will be read. You have to take care of me, Tom. You can't let me die."

Bud stopped, and his breath came from between dry, cracked lips in short, husky sobs before he went on.

"Get it, Royal?" he whispered. "Understand? I've got you! But I won't turn you in. I don't want you to hang. No! I want you to lose what I lost! I want to watch you squirm. Every day I want to see your eyes with fear in them, waiting, watching, wondering if anything has happened to me. If I die, you hang. If I disappear, you hang. Think of that, Royal. Think what it means!"

Watching Tom Royal's eyes, Bud Brandon laughed hysterically. "Money, Tom!" he rasped. "I want it now! Lots of it. Pay me off. Maybe I'll live a long time. You can't tell. Mebby I'll *never* die. Get me enough for a ranch. Start me off again, like I was before you played me for a sucker. Before you stole the gun away from Jigger Moore, so they'd think he had none." Bud laughed again.

TOM ROYAL, trying to show bravado said, "You're crazy! You're a damn fool. Get out of here before I—"

"Sure," Brandon croaked. "Sure, I'll get out. And I don't give a damn! Tomorrow you'll hang. Get ready to die, Tom. Get—"

"Wait!" Royal put out a restraining hand. "Sure, Bud. I was kiddin'. How much? A thousand?"

"Ten thousand, now," Bud said, that crooked smile on his pale, drawn lips. "An' you better hurry. I gotta get to a doctor. I'm in bad shape, Tom. I better not die. You better not keep me waitin' too long!"

Hurriedly, hands shaking, Royal stacked money bundles on the desk. With haunted eyes he watched Bud Brandon scoop them up, watched him leave. Through the barroom again, legs unsteady, Bud marched, the money inside his blood-soaked shirt. Guided by Miguel's solicitous hand, he came to the doctor's office. He was laughing when the medico cut his shirt off his back. He laughed when the doctor told him he'd better lie down and rest for a week or two.

"No bones touched. A lot of blood lost. But you need rest. You're hysterical now. You need—"

"That's not what I need!" Bud laughed. He knew what he needed. He needed to watch Tom Royal crawl, needed to watch him go to hell, the way Bud Brandon had gone to hell.

Bud went into the Tax Assessor's office, paid up some back taxes that Tom Royal had let go on Bud Brandon's old ranch. That was all Tom Royal had to do to get it. Under the law that was all Bud Brandon had to do to get it back, if he did it within one year. And this was within a year.

After he had reclaimed the ranch he said to Miguel, "Now, you get me some punchers. We're gonna get us some cattle. We're due to go places around here. And bring me a buckboard up in front of the restaurant."

While Miguel went down the street, Bud Brandon got a new shirt, washed, got a shave.

"Bud," the barber said, "you look awful bad. You look like you're gonna die. You better go to bed and stay there."

Shaky, but with determination pushing him on, the exultation in him making him feel as though nothing could kill him now, Bud got out of the chair, shook his head. "Don't you worry about me. I won't die. I'm gonna live a long time."

Out on the street he turned in the door of Joe's Eat Shop. He stepped behind the counter, moved up to a woman stirring something in a pot and touched her on the shoulder. When she turned, all the cynical mockery was gone from Brandon's face. His eyes were soft and filled with a great longing, and with something that seemed like fear; fear, perhaps, of what she would say.

"Susan," he said softly, "I'll never take another drink as long as I live. I've got some money; enough to start over again. I've got our place back. I love you. Will you come back to me—back home?"

She stared at him for a long moment, her eyes searching his for a sign of the old defeat that had been there so long. Finally she whispered, gladness in her voice, "I've waited so long for you to say that, Bud!"

Then she was in his arms; he was hugging her fiercely. Somebody in the eat shop laughed, but they paid no attention. His hand on her arm, he took her out front. Miguel was there with a buckboard. They climbed into it, drove down the street, passing the saloon where Tom Royal and his gunmen were lined outside, staring at him, undisguised hate in their eyes. But they said nothing, did nothing.

Brandon smiled back at them, that cynical mockery on his lips, hard lights in his eyes. Hell, no, they wouldn't do anything! Royal and his gunnies were powerless to hurt. But how different it would have been had it not been for the letter Jim Herne had written in the little book.

When they were half way to the ranch three horsemen caught up with them. They were Miguel and two cowboys. Curly Darr, a freckled-faced kid whom Bud knew, and a red-headed young puncher he didn't know named Carrots.

"The men you say for me to get," Miguel said after he'd told Bud who they were.

They rode on. At the ranchyard gate Bud tried to get out of the buckboard seat and pitched forward on his face, down into a void of darkness that swirled up to meet him. Dimly, he heard his wife scream, knew that Carrots and Curly Darr were rushing forward to catch him. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Build-Up to War

AS BRANDON fell forward his eyes registered something at the far end of the range—shining barbed wire. It was the first thing he

thought of when he awoke, to look up at Susan's anxious face. She smiled and stroked his head, and he grinned at her. But he kept thinking about the wire. Royal had put that up. That's how Royal was breaking the nesters. And as he thought of it, Bud Brandon knew that that was a way to break Tom Royal.

So when he was able to get up he got more wire. He strung it so that it barred Royal from either water or a way to market. He went to town and saw Banker Dawson.

"That book I put in the envelope," Bud said. "You still got it?"

Dawson nodded. "Yes. It's locked in the safe."

"Be sure and keep it there. Watch it like it was worth its weight in gold. It's worth more than that. It's worth a million dollars! Now, where can I hire me some gun-fighters?"

Dawson narrowed his eyes. "Gun fighters? Maybe I could find you some," he said carefully.

"Send me six," Bud said. "Find out what Tom Royal pays such men as Cull. Then boost the ante. I want good men; better men than Royal's."

"I'll see what I can do," Dawson said. "I think I can fix you up."

Out and up the street, Bud saw young Dan Herne, the son of old Jim Herne who had died out in the cabin. With Dan, up away from the saloon, were three of the young nesters, together with old Ben Ford, Buck Ford's brother.

Sighting Bud, they moved to meet him, stopped in front of the saloon. "We want to talk to you," Herne said coldly. "We been waitin' till you got on your feet."

"You didn't need to wait till I got on my feet." There was a cold knot in Bud's belly. "You could come to talk to me any time."

Herne said, "What we want to talk about makes it so you need to be on your feet."

In the outer fringe of Bud's vision now were Royal and his gunnies, ranged outside the door of the saloon. Dimly he saw them while he watched Herne, sensing the ominous import in the man's words. But he said slowly, "Well, if that's the way it is, I'm on my feet. What is this all about?"

"It's about that mess up at the line shack," Dan Herne bit out. "You get my old man and Pete Gramley out there to trap Norge. But they get killed and you get away. That stinks. You do Royal's dirty work for a year. You're a no-good drunken bum, without a cent in your jeans. Then all of a sudden you got money, right after my old man gets murdered. That stinks too! I don't believe Norge was up there. I don't believe you ever thought he was there. I think Tom Royal is behind it. I think you're still his pet poodle. It all smells to high Heaven."

"You're wrong, Dan," Bud said. "I'm out to break Tom Royal. I'm going to bust him wide open. I've fenced my place. He can't get to water. He can't get to market. I—"

"Likely!" Herne snapped. "You sayin' that while Tom Royal stands here and listens to you! And where did you get your money? Who's backin' you?"

Bud started to speak, but Herne stopped him with, "You got a gun, Bud. *Use it!*"

Bud watched Herne's hand sweep toward his gun. "Don't, Dan!" he stammered.

Herne froze. Cull, gun in hand, said coldly, "You nester clodhoppers leave him alone. He don't feel like fightin'!"

Cull's gun covered Herne. Gaston, Paquett, Gorman, Tom Royal, all watched the others.

Herne smiled grimly, let his gun slide back into his holster. "I guess that proves it!" he said sarcastically.

He spun on his heel and the others followed him up the street. Bud turned to

look at the oily smile on Royal's face. Royal said, mockery in his voice, "You see how it is, Bud. I can't let you get hurt. You know that, don't you?"

Bud said nothing. He moved wearily up to his horse, mounted and rode away. Filling his soul was a great dread that his hate for Tom Royal had damned him forever in the eyes of his neighbors. In no way that he could think, could he prove to them that he was still not Royal's man.

The fact that Royal's gunnies backed him proved that he was in with Royal. The only way he could disprove it would be to give Jim Herne's little book to the law, admit that he'd taken bribe money from Royal, lose Susan because she wouldn't approve of what he'd done. She'd quit him, go back to the restaurant. He'd be broke, busted, a has-been again. He couldn't do that!

♦ ♦ ♦

STOPPING in the hills before he came to the ranch, he waited, alone, wondering what to do; how to make Susan happy; how to guarantee her future; how to do it all and still ruin Royal. But he could think of nothing. As dusk, then darkness, came to the hills, he rode on slowly, his fevered brain seething with his unsolved problems.

Suddenly he stopped. A shot had sounded over near his ranch. A red glare sprang suddenly into the sky. Fire! He raked his mount, thundered forward, his heart pounding wildly. Topping a rise, his eyes looked down at his blazing ranchhouse. Dim figures raced about down there below him. Horsemen galloped away, off into the darkness. Guns sent thin streamers of orange fire into the night, thunderous echoes into the hills.

Brandon slammed down the slope and across the flat. The guns were gradually going silent. Bud leaped off his horse in the yard. Somebody was carrying a woman from the house. Miguel laid Susan Brandon on the ground in front of Bud, stared up at him with a great fear in his eyes.

"I fear she is dead," he whispered. "And it was Dan Herne. I saw him. With him were many nesters. They tore down the fence that Royal had put up while you were away. They killed thees new man, Curly Darr. Thees man, Carots, he come running hard to tell me that Dan Herne is come.

"By the time I go to the house to tell the Señora Brandon they are here, the bullets they come fast. The guns they shoot hard and straight, and one bullet hit the señora in the head. They set fire to the house. Then thees men the Señor Dawson send to you, they come and drive Señor Herne and his men away. They are now chasing them."

Down beside Susan, Bud Brandon felt of her pulse. It was strong. Bud picked her up and carried her to the bunkhouse. He laid her on a cot and she opened her eyes and looked at him and smiled wanly.

Then puzzlement came into her eyes and she frowned. "Who was it?" she asked. "What is it, Bud? What is happening?"

Bud shook his head, and because he didn't want to worry her by letting her know what the nesters thought, he said, "I don't know. All I can say is, it won't happen again. You rest. Go to sleep. A bullet just grazed your head. You'll be all right."

She smiled again, trustingly, then closed her eyes.

Outside, the sound of hoofbeats came to Bud. He took a gun in his hand, went to the door and met Carrots at the head of a group of six riders.

Carrots said, "They killed Curly. It was Herne and a bunch of nesters. We lost 'em. These are the men Dawson sent out. What do we do now?"

Grim satisfaction in him at what he

saw, Bud studied the gun-toters Dawson had sent: six hard-faced, cold-eyed, double-gunned killers. Thinking of Susan, he grated, "Put up the fence Herne tore down. Keep a watch on it. Don't let anybody through, either Tom Royal or any of the nesters. If you need more men to make that stick let me know!"

Tall and lean and hook-nosed, the foremost gunmen grinned crookedly. "There's six of us an' the red-head," he said. "You'll never need any more than that. My name's Savoy." He turned, pointed to the others. "Weems—Faile—Manus—Danver an' Roe. That's all you'll need to whip any bunch of nesters that ever lived."

Nodding to each man, Bud said, "Howdy." Then: "The nesters put a rope around their own neck. I was figurin' on takin' down the fence that Royal put up. I'm out to break Royal. I had no fight with the nesters. I tried to tell them that in town and they wouldn't listen. But if this is the way they want it, we can give it to them. When they take to makin' war on women and burnin' homes, they can go to hell. They can go broke with Tom Royal. I can whip 'em all and do it easy!"

"Sure," Savoy agreed. "Sure you can."

At the slight note of irony in Savoy's voice, Bud frowned. "Don't ever think I can't!" he snapped. "An', brother, don't forget it!"

Savoy said, his face wooden, "If I didn't think you could I wouldn't have said so." Then, to the others: "Come on. We gotta put up a fence."

Watching them ride away, Bud wondered if he had imagined the sarcasm in Savoy's voice. He wondered if he was right in declaring war on the nesters. Then he reasoned he *was* right. He was justified. They had burned his ranchhouse. They had shot his wife. They had not hesitated to put two and two together and make it six when they had reasoned that he had deliberately lured Buck Ford and Pete Gramley and old Jim Herne to their deaths.

They had no proof that he had done that. They had jumped to conclusions. They had placed a woman's life in jeopardy. They were as bad as Tom Royal. They could stew in the same broth! They could pray for rain when their cattle were thirsty. They could pray, but it didn't look as if it would rain. Bud Brandon hoped it wouldn't. . . .

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CHAPTER THREE

Boomerang Trap

AS THE hot summer set in it didn't rain. The grass grew brown and dead. The water holes dried up. The cattle grew gaunt, thin; they pressed their ribby sides up against Bud Brandon's fences as the tantalizing smell of water came to their nostrils. But they didn't get through. Six hard-faced gun-toters saw to that.

Carrots, at first intent only on revenge for Curly Darr's death, laughed when the cattle bawled, when haggard, hollow-eyed nesters lined their fences, desperately trying to keep the cattle back while Brandon's stone-faced gunmen grinned and looked as though they didn't give a damn whether they broke through or not, just as long as they were there with their

guns when they did it. Things looked bad.

But after a while Carrots quit laughing. He frowned when the cattle bawled. He watched the men and watched Brandon's smile. In late June he started talking.

"I don't like this," he told Bud. "At first I did. I hated everybody. Wanted to get any one connected in any way with Curly bein' killed. But now I think you're wrong. I think you outa let the cows through. You're hurtin' innocent women, too. You're killin' cattle. They didn't hurt you. I believe—"

The rage that flared into Bud's eyes stopped him. "So you think I'm wrong!" he snapped. "Okay. Get your money and get the hell off my ranch! But I wonder what Curly would think about you? I'd hate to have been a pardner of yours!"

Carrots turned. He rode away—and didn't come back after his money. Bud laughed. "He's a damned fool!" he muttered. "Anybody's a damned fool when they think I oughta tear down a fence!"

By July the buzzards swarmed over the range, flocking to the feast the drought had brought. By August the sound of gunfire could be heard out on the range as the nesters killed their cattle, trying to stop them from stampeding through the fence. By August Susan's eyes held a haunted, unhappy light that was forever in Bud Brandon's own eyes. He asked himself what was wrong. But he knew, because he had seen her riding out over the range, to look at its desolation, to view the havoc her husband had wrought.

By Stepember Bud knew it was showdown time. Neither man or beast could stand what Fate and Bud Brandon was bringing to them. The cattle would soon break through, and when they did the nesters would follow. But Tom Royal was losing more money than anybody else. And, come hell and high water, Bud would break the men who hadn't listened to him when he'd wanted to tell them he wasn't a murderer. He'd break the men who had shot Susan.

At night he'd ride out and listen to the shooting. Then he'd ride home and dream of Tom Royal going broke. But tonight when he came home he stopped in the living room of the big new house he'd built. A piece of paper on the table fluttered slightly in the soft breeze that swept through the open door. The sight of it fascinated him, and he moved slowly, hesitantly, to pick it up. It read as follows:

> Bud:
> I'm leaving. You've let hate take the place of love in our lives. I would not speak of it to you because I knew by the look of you that you would not listen.
>
> Susan.

Perhaps a dozen times Bud Brandon read that while he stood there, his mean little world crashing down about his ears. He looked up and Miguel, the aged Mexican, was there, staring at him. Bud shook the paper in his hand.

"You know what has happened?" he asked.

Miguel nodded. "Si," he said in a low voice. "The señora told me she was leaving. Me, I try to stop her. But she would not listen."

Sinking slowly into a chair, Bud stared morosely at the wall, at the flickering shadows cast in dancing patterns by the oil lamp on the wall. "It's true," he said softly. "I hated Tom Royal more than I loved her. I lived hate, and that was all. I don't blame her. You, Miguel, you do not blame her either, do you?"

Miguel smiled softly. Brandon could tell that the Mexican was thinking of the little boy that Bud had saved from the quicksand. Miguel would never forget that. Miguel shook his head. "Me, señor, perhaps I am different. But to me you can do no wrong. To me all that hurts you is wrong. All that pleases you is right. That is all I know."

With haggard, haunted eyes, Bud stared at the old man. "Thank you, Miguel," he said slowly.

When Chavez left the room Bud rose and paced restlessly about, the house echoing hollowly with the sound of his bootheels. An empty house! An empty life! His hate had brought him that. So he'd tear down the fences. He'd find Susan and explain it all to her; about the note Jim Herne had written; about why he'd done as he had. He'd admit he was wrong. He'd give the note Jim Herne had written to the law. He'd give back the money he'd gotten from Royal. Maybe Susan would forgive him and they'd start over again.

Running out of the house, he saddled a horse. He noticed that Miguel's horse was gone, wondered vaguely where, then dismissed it as he rode furiously toward Rodeo City. In town, he looked in the Eat Shop. But Susan was not there. Up at the City Hotel her name wasn't on the register. Bud asked old Lew Benson, the hotel owner, if he'd seen her. Benson let great distaste flow into his eyes.

Jerking a thumb toward the street, he said, "Your wife? She left on the evenin' stage for Apache Wells. You might do the town a favor an' do the same thing!"

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GLANCING at the clock, Bud figured that his wife had been gone an hour. If he rode fast he could catch the stage. He hurried outside. Carrots, the younger puncher who had quit him, was just dismounting beside Bud's tethered horse. Carrots stepped out in front of the pony, barring Bud's way to his mount. Bud tried to side-step, but Carrots threw out a hand. "Just a minute," he snapped. "You ain't goin' any place!"

"Get out of my way, you damned fool!" Bud raged.

Carrots spread his booted feet apart, swung a claw-fingered hand near his gunbutt. "You heard me," he repeated softly. "You ain't goin' any place—but to hell!"

For the first time Bud noticed the pallor of Carrots' face, the hungry light in his eyes, the tenseness of his pose. "I'm gonna kill you, Bud!" the man breathed. "I'm gonna kill you to keep a half a hundred good men from dyin'. I should have known you were a skunk when you started your fencin'. But I felt sorry for you. That swayed my judgment.

"Then, for a while, I hated the gents that killed Curly. But when I woke up I started to work for Dan Herne. Over there, among the nesters, I see women an' kids that need grub that you're keepin' 'em from gettin'. I see good men eatin' their hearts out while they watch their cattle die and their families go hungry. I—"

"All that's ended now, Carrots," Bud said. "It's over. My wife's gone. I—"

Carrots laughed dryly. "Sure it's over. You're damn right it's over, because in just a minute you're gonna die. I'm gonna kill you before all hell breaks loose tonight. I'm gonna kill you because tonight the nesters are comin' through. They'll either save their cattle or die. Men can stand just so much, then they go haywire. There's a price that men won't pay to live, Bud, and you've set it. You set it too high. So drag that gun at your hip, mister. I'm killin' you right now!"

Carrots' hand moved. Bud Brandon screamed for him to stop. But he didn't stop. He seemed not to hear. His mind was set on one thing, and he was trying to do it. His hand moved fast as it swung the gun up.

Bud leaped forward, still yelling. He struck him, dragging at his own gun as he knocked Carrots off balance. Carrots cursed, trying to line his gun on Bud. Bud slashed down with the barrel, striking

Carrots on the temple. Carrots crumpled.

Breathing hard, Bud stepped back. A passer-by looked down at Carrots, then stared with angry eyes at Bud. "You killed him," he accused.

Bud shook his head. But the fellow called out, "Bud Brandon killed Carrots!"

Somebody else up the street took it up. "Bud Brandon killed Carrots!"

The fellow near Bud tried to grab him, but Bud tore loose, ran down an alley. He could hear a mob coming after him. Somebody fired at him. He stumbled, fell, and the mob surged past, unable to see him in the darkness. He rose slowly and crept back toward the street. Near an open window he stopped as the sound of voices came to him.

Somebody inside argued, "What's the difference now if they do kill him? Fact is, it would be better that way. It'll save us the trouble. He's served his purpose. We've let him take the blame for everything we wanted to do. He kept up the fences. He made us lose cattle, but we'll get all the basin for a few head of stock we lost. It's time for Bud Brandon to die, and tonight is as good a night as any. Let the mob tear him to pieces!"

Slowly, cautiously, Bud raised his head, peered in through the window. There were Tom Royal, Jerome Dawson, and Savoy, Bud's gunman.

Royal nodded. "I guess you're right, Dawson. Savoy, you hurry back to the ranch. Carrots told Bud the nesters would be through tonight. Stop 'em. Kill 'em off. Then our job will be done."

CHAPTER FOUR

Death's Corral

STUNNED, Bud Brandon stood there in the darkness, his mind awhirl, gradually absorbing the import of all he'd heard. Savoy, Tom Royal's man! All his men Royal's men! Dawson, working with Royal! How they had tricked him, letting him starve out the basin, so that he, Bud Brandon, would be branded a damned skunk instead of Royal. How many times a fool he had been in thinking only of revenge, when he had not been getting revenge at all. What a fool he'd been!

He heard Savoy say, "I'll be seein' yuh." Then the pound of boot heels as Savoy left the room. Bud started away, then stopped, knowing that here, before him, was a job more definite than any of his scheme for revenge. Here was something he couldn't dodge, something that must be done, just as Carrots had seen a job he had thought must be done. And now Bud Brandon's job was the same as Carrots'. He must save a half hundred men from dying. Regardless of the fact that Susan was on the stage, running away from him, he must do it. Regardless of anything . . .

He stepped swiftly down the alley, moving through a back door that led through a hallway to the room where Dawson and big Tom Royal were. He could hear their voices as he moved silently along. He stepped into the open door and Tom Royal was saying to Dawson, ". . . and so that's that!"

Bud snapped, "Yeah. That's that, Tom! Turn around and go for a gun! I was outside the window just a minute ago!"

For a second Tom Royal was still. For a second everything was still. Then there was a flurry of quick, eye-defying motion. Big Tom Royal's gun leaped into his hand. Bud Brandon's swung up, already in his hand. It bellowed, and Royal was smashed back against the wall, dead when he bounced away from it. Dawson, tugging at a hidden gun under his coat, squealed in fright as he saw Bud's Colt swinging about. He tried to dive under the bullet . . . but he dived into it.

Bud stood there for a second, the

strange thought coming to him that here lay the great Tom Royal, whom he had feared for so long.

Then the tumultuous boom of boots pounding on the boardwalks came to him. He ran from the room and met Cull in the hall. Cull was startled, had his gun in his holster. He tried to draw, but Bud cut him down like a flash of lightning. He heard the mob coming as he raced up the alley toward the street.

Bud leaped on his horse. Someone, spotting him from the alley, yelled. The bullets began to sing and whine. Bud raced on.

Soon he out-distanced them, trying to catch Savoy before he reached the ranch. Off on the range it was quiet, except for the faint, plaintive bawl of thirsting cattle. Carrots had been right! The nesters had stopped trying to keep their cattle away from the fences. They were coming through.

Racing away across the range, Brandon was filled with a heavy, dead sense of futility. He could not hope to win. All he could hope to do would be to kill enough of the six gunmen to give the nesters a chance.

Then, through the gloom of the night, he saw Savoy, big and tall and wearing his Mexican style cone-shaped hat. Savoy stopped and turned as Bud drew closer. Bud took his gun in his hand, and at its glint in the pale light of a crescent moon, Savoy gave a startled call. Some men Bud hadn't seen began to move about, and Bud could see then that there were two others with Savoy. Faile and Manus.

Manus yelled, "Hey! It's Brandon! What—"

No matter who it was, Savoy wasn't one to take chances when a gent had a drawn gun. His Colt spurted flame. Bud's horse screamed, reared high on its hind legs. Bud had to leap free to keep it from falling on him. He landed on his feet like a cat, his gun steady now. He fired at Savoy—and hit him. He gave a crazy sort of dry-voiced laugh when he saw Savoy stagger. One against six! He'd got one! One against five!

Then Manus and Faile began to fire. They didn't run. They didn't dodge. They didn't appear to give a damn for Brandon's bullets. They stood there, flat-footed, and slammed bullets at him; bullets that hit him; bullets that made him deathly sick.

Finally Manus folded up as though a mule had kicked him in the stomach. Then Faile was suddenly very still and stiff and straight. A second later he wilted to the ground.

♠ ♠ ♠

THEN it was quiet, except for the bawl of the cattle. On shaky legs Bud marched over to where his horse lay. It was dead. He reloaded his gun. He looked about with pain-squinted eyes, to see that the horses belonging to Savoy and Faile and Manus had run away. He smiled cynically as he heard the distant pound of hoofs, wondering if that would be the others, Roe and Danver and Weems—or was it the nesters?

Then he saw three black shapes. He knew them to be Roe and Weems and Danver, because they were on his side of the fence. They were sharp-eyed, these gun-toters, because they spotted him while they were quite a distance away. Weems called out, "What the hell happened here? Who's that?"

Standing behind his dead horse, Bud felt his legs tremble with weakness. He tried to make his voice steady. He hid his gun behind him so they wouldn't see it glitter in the light of the moon. "It's me, Brandon," he said. "There's been a fight here. I stumbled onto it. Savoy and Manus and Faile are dead."

Roe, his squeaky voice high-pitched, swore. "Who fought them?"

Still they didn't come close. They were cautious, cagey as hell. Bud knew he was going to fall in a minute, so he said huskily. "What the hell! Come and take a look. What you afraid of?"

Roe laughed, a peculiar little laugh. Weems said, "I don't remember ever bein' afraid of anything, mister!"

They came forward then, but slowly. Bud watched them closely.

Then they stopped. They were close. Danver said, "Somehow or other, this stinks. I didn't hear any horses. But we heard the shots. I—"

Bud swung his gun out in front of him. "Sure!" he snapped. "It stinks to high Heaven, Danver — the whole rotten mess!"

Then, all at once, it was a gun-roaring hell. Men cursing, horses screaming; rearing up, falling. Bullets swarmed past Brandon. One knocked him down and he couldn't get up. So he lay behind his dead horse and fired over it. He saw, through the smoke swirls, Weems clutch at his belly, heard him yell. He saw Danver fall off his horse, and Roe trying to quiet his plunging mount.

Danver sank down to earth as he tried to get up. Roe screamed, a scream that was cut off short. Then there should have been nothing there, no sound, no movement. But there was sound. The thunder of horse's hoofs filled the air. There was movement, a body of horsemen sweeping toward the wire.

Bud rose slowly, shakily, to his feet, wanting to be up on his hind legs when he told them what he'd done and why he'd done it. But when he got up he fell down again, plunging into a void of darkness that lasted till he heard soft voices.

He opened his eyes, and Miguel was there, his aged, wrinkled face anxious, his black eyes worried. He smiled when Bud looked at him. Bud looked about and there was Dan Herne and Ben Ford. Frowning, Bud looked at Miguel again.

"You were wounded," Miguel explained. "You have been unconscious many hours. But you have talked to us. You have told about the shooting of the sheriff's son and of Tom Royal's trick to make you work for him. You have told us everything."

Miguel stopped and smiled again. He gestured toward Herne and Ben Ford. He said, "Theese men, they are men of a truth. For they have seen behind the reasons that made you do those things and knew that they too might have done them had they been you. They have forgiven all and helped to care for you. They said that a man who would offer his life to try to right a wrong he had done was worthy of another chance."

"That goes as it lays," Herne said. "There's no hard feelings. I'll be proud to be your neighbor."

He came over and shook Bud's hand. Bud said, "Thank you," to him and to Ben Ford. But he knew nothing could be the same again because Susan was gone.

Then he opened his eyes and saw her beside him, with Miguel behind her. She smiled and reached out and stroked his damp hair away from his forehead.

"Miguel brought me back," she said softly. "He caught the stage. He told me that there was one thing I should know before I left: That happiness would come to me only if I lived for the happiness of someone else. I realized, then, that I hadn't done that. I hadn't stopped to discover why you did as you did. He shamed me, and I came back, and I'm sorry I . . . "

Bud silenced her by placing a finger over her lips. Through the golden sheen of her hair as she bent her head down to place her lips on his, he could see old Miguel smiling, tip-toeing softly from the room. And Bud smiled softly too.

THE END

By BILL GULICK

But a woman like Ruth could have her pick of many men.

BOOK LEARNIN' FOR A TOWN-TAMER

For a pretty girl's smile, a trigger-quick hireling who couldn't even spell 'kill' took the job of bringing culture to uncivilized Valley's End. But as school teacher—or heart-breaker—Town-tamer Wesley soon decided he'd better stick to his guns!

EVERYBODY in Valley's End said something ought to be done about civilizing the town. But there were two lines of thought as to how the civilizing process should be accomplished. One was represented by crusty old Otis Storm, he being the leading real estate agent in town; the other by Ruth, his dark-eyed daughter.

Ruth believed it must be done gently. She proposed importing a school teacher who would bring culture by teaching the young folks the finer things. Old Man Storm was more direct. He opined the only way to civilize snakes like Slick Blackburn and his sidewinder cronies was with Mr. Colt's equalizers—in capable hands at ten paces.

Ruth and the old man argued about it at length. She was sweet and gentle and obstinate; he blustered and was just plain stubborn. In the end, he compromised. "All right, Ruthie! All right! You're jest like yore maw. Yore—" He mopped his face, not being able to explain just what her maw was like. "I'll git you a dad-burned school teacher. But also, I'm goin' to git somebody that knows which end of a Colt's got the hole in it—jest in case peaceful methods don't work."

Later that same afternoon, a land prospector, who had made himself a nice chunk of cash gambling on the soaring prices of property in booming Valley's End, dropped in at Storm's real estate office. When Storm discovered the prospector was headed back Kansas City way, he poured out a drink; also his troubles. The prospector drank down both.

"Tell you what. I'll scout around in Kansas City for a school teacher and a tough town-tamer. I'll drop you a line if I have any luck."

"I'd sure be a heap obliged," Storm said, and poured two more straight ones. They drank to luck.

A week later a letter came saying two gentlemen, Jonathan Wesley and Peter Hardrock by names, were headed Valley's End way. The past record of each, the letter said, had been carefully checked. Each was recommended as being the best in his field.

Storm shook a horny fist at the Breakdown Saloon, across the way, where Slick Blackburn and his crew hung out. "I reckon," he prophesied, "that things will start poppin' around here before long."

Which, so far as it went, was a neat bit of prophesying. . . .

When the west-bound stage groaned to a stop in Valley's End one hot afternoon, a tall, well-groomed stranger stepped out and considered the thronged board walk with grave eyes. He had a cultured look about him. His black felt hat was spotless; so was his long frock coat. There was a look of studious dignity in the way he carried his gaunt body.

The stranger, after a moment's careful scrutiny of the passersby, walked downstreet until he reached Otis Storm's office. For a moment he paused on the steps, then shrugging his narrow shoulders half sadly, went inside.

"Good afternoon. You're Otis Storm?"

Frowning, Storm glanced up. "Yeah. An' who might you be?"

"Jonathan Wesley. I was told to see you about a job."

Storm glared at Jonathan Wesley, and Jonathan Wesley gazed mildly back. Storm sighed. "Yeah. I reckon there's a job fer you here. Not, understand, that it was my doin'. You're kind of the result of a compromise."

Wesley nodded with understanding. He took a chair at Storm's invitation, carefully lifting the tail of his frock coat as he sat down.

Storm questioned him brusquely. "Have you had much experience teachin'?"

Jonathan Wesley frowned ever so slightly. He fidgeted a bit in the chair, adjusting a metal object on his right hip so that it didn't bulge so much under his coat. "Why, I have taught a few things in my day. In Dodge, once, I taught a rather contrary individual to dance. Another time—in Deadwood, I think it was—I gave etiquette lessons to some pupils."

Storm's face purpled. He banged a big fist hard on the desk. "Dancin'! Ettecut! Bunch of tomfoolery! Damned if you'll teach such nonsense in Valley's End!"

Wesley shrugged. "Of course I'll handle things in whatever way you say. Just name what you want."

Before the real estate agent could answer, Ruth Storm, walking with that queenly way of hers, came into the office. Wesley arose and swept off his hat. Blushing, Ruth inspected him while her father performed the introduction. She extended her hand.

"I'm so glad you're here, Mister Wesley. With someone like you to educate us, perhaps decent folks will have a chance to live like human beings."

Wesley's eyes flashed strangely. A muscle in his thin face worked. And during that moment he held her hand, Jonathan Wesley fell in love with Ruth Storm.

"I'll be glad, ma'am, if what I do will make Valley's End nicer to live in. It seems pretty nice to me already."

Ruth smiled. Old Man Storm snorted like he had choked on a popcorn ball. But Jonathan Wesley remained gravely silent, his face inscrutable, as befitted his profession.

It was while the three of them were standing there that Peter Hardrock entered. Blew in, would say it better. He was that kind, big in every way you could name. Six feet and a half. Two hundred and fifty pounds. And a booming voice like boulders crashing through a tin barn.

"I understand there's a job here for me," he said. He was trying to talk soft, but his words made the windows rattle.

Ruth shrank back a little. Jonathan Wesley's eyes narrowed. But Otis Storm showed genuine pleasure at seeing the big man.

"Dag-nab me if you ain't a sight for sore eyes!" He wrung Hardrock's meaty fist, then stepped back to inspect the towering physique with admiring gaze. "Reckon Slick Blackburn an' his snakes will crawl in their holes now!" He roared with hearty laughter. Then suddenly, he sobered. "Say, where's yore gun?"

Peter Hardrock's jaw dropped. "Gun? What would I need a gun for? Why, I never carried one in my life." Hardrock looked amazed.

Storm's raucous laugh bellowed out and he slapped Hardrock between the shoulder blades. "If you ain't the smooth one! Haw!" He lowered his voice to a husky whisper. "Don't go tellin' it around, but I never took a drink of likker in my life, either."

"Why," Peter Hardrock said, "that's nothing to be ashamed of. Neither have I."

Storm roared at that and pounded Hardrock on the back again. The big man coughed and his face got red. Jonathan Wesley, watching, knew from the puzzled expression in Hardrock's eyes that he wasn't understanding it at all, and started to break in and explain a couple of things. Then he glanced at Ruth and, seeing a strange something in the way she was looking at him, decided to keep his peace.

♥ ♥ ♥

THAT evening, Jonathan Wesley dropped in at the Breakdown Saloon. He pushed his way unobtrusively through the rowdy, boisterous crowd and stood up to the bar, contemplating the scene in the big back-bar mirror as he waited to be served. His glance was swift, almost casual, yet he fitted everything he saw into neat little patterns in his mind, to remain there for future reference. It was an old habit of his.

"What'll it be?" said the pudgy bartender.

Hesitating an instant, Wesley gazed with longing eyes at the line of bottles on the back bar. He sighed.

"Sarsaparilla."

For five minutes he lingered over the drink, watching the mirror. The oily-

haired, bony-faced man playing stud poker at the corner table must be Slick Blackburn, he guessed. And those men with him—the broken-nosed one, the cross-eyed one and the furtive-eyed one—must be some of his cronies. He knew the breed. Killers, every one. More dangerous because they were the cowardly kind that worked best behind a man's back on a dark night.

With a last fond glance at the array of bottles, he left the Breakdown and went back to the hotel. Peter Hardrock was sitting on the veranda. Wesley drew up a chair beside him and sat there without speaking for a time. A wagon rattled by in the street. A couple of half-drunk cowboys, singing hoarsely, reeled past on the boardwalk.

Wesley said, "It seems, Mister Hardrock, that there's been a slight mixup."

Hardrock turned in his chair. "Mix-up?"

"Storm seems to have you tagged as a gunman."

There was a long moment's silence. At last, Hardrock said haltingly, "I—I don't quite follow you."

In a few brief words, Wesley told him some things he thought he should know. He told them matter-of-factly, without frills, and when he had concluded, he spread his hands with a gesture of finality. "So, it appears you've drawn the job of smoking out a nest of killers headed by a gent named Slick Blackburn."

The silence fell again. Somewhere downstreet a cur dog howled mournfully.

Hardrock's voice wasn't so booming now. "But I'm a school teacher," he protested. "I—I don't know anything about guns and shooting and such."

"All of which I gathered," answered Wesley. In the dim light, he measured Hardrock's solid frame with shrewd eyes. "To my way of thinking, a man big as you wouldn't need to pack a gun."

An eagerness came into Hardrock's voice. "Do you really mean that?" He gripped Wesley's arm hard. "You know," he said wistfully, "I've always wanted to do something besides teach school. In fact, I'm sick of teaching school. Same thing day in and day out. Kids asking questions and you answering them. Kids making fun of you behind your back. Nobody respects a school teacher. No girl ever would fall in love with a school teacher."

Wesley had different ideas about that last, but he didn't propound them. He just waited.

Longing crept into Hardrock's voice. "If I could get some guns and practice a bit—" Suddenly he broke off. "Say, what's your business?"

Wesley smiled wryly. "At the moment, I'm a school teacher."

"But you weren't when you applied for a job?"

"No."

"Then," Hardrock said triumphantly, "you must be the gunman Storm sent for!"

Wesley inclined his head. Then for nearly two hours the two men sat on the porch, talking in low tones. It was midnight when they arose to go to bed. Hardrock extended a beefy hand in which Wesley's slim one was lost.

"Then it's a deal?" Hardrock said anxiously.

"It's a deal," Wesley answered.

"And no backing out?" Hardrock boomed.

"No backing out," Wesley repeated softly.

♠ ♠ ♠

THERE were several times during the following week when Wesley wished he could back out. Teaching school, he discovered, wasn't as simple as it appeared. Particularly to a man who hadn't passed the fourth grade.

Conducting classes in such subjects as geography and history wasn't so bad, because all he had to do was have the students read the lesson in the books, but trouble started when the youths got to asking him questions which weren't answered in any of the books.

In geography one day, a freckled-faced young one asked him how far it was to the nearest star. Wesley pondered a moment. "A far piece," he said finally, and figured that was close enough.

In English class, a literary-minded girl asked him if he thought Shakespeare would live. Wesley said probably so, if he ate right and kept regular hours. Then somebody in the back of the room stuck up a hand and asked him how to spell 'asafoetida'.

He dismissed school an hour early that day.

On the other side of the bargain, Peter Hardrock was getting along fine, Wesley learned. Storm had pinned a star on the big man and paraded him up and down the streets like a circus elephant. Hardrock had bought a pair of sixguns which he wore constantly. He didn't know how to use them, but they looked good on him. He looked plenty tough.

A strange peacefulness had settled over Valley's End with the coming of Hardrock. Over at the Breakdown, there hadn't been a killing for ten days. In fact, most of the time the saloon was quiet as a church. Wesley hoped, for Ruth Storm's sake, that the peace would be good and permanent.

When he was locking up the Crooked Tree schoolhouse one afternoon, Ruth Storm chanced to be walking by on her way home. A strange quivering shook Wesley when he saw her. He doffed his hat and bowed.

"Good afternoon, Miss Storm."

She smiled. "Hello. Were your students good today?"

Too good, he thought bleakly. But he frowned and shook his head. "They seem a bit rusty on spelling. For instance, one of them insisted on spelling 'kilt' with two 'l's'."

Puzzled lines wrinkled her brow. "'Kilt'?"

"Yes. Like you would say, 'He got shot and was kilt'."

For a moment the puzzled expression deepened, then she laughed gaily. "Oh, Mister Wesley, you have *such* a sense of humor!"

He bowed again. "Thanks." Then he asked her if he might walk her home. She said she guessed it would be all right.

Walking along slowly, he led the conversation around so she would have to do most of the talking. For one thing, he was afraid of displaying his ignorance if he talked; for another, he liked the soft, pleasant sound of her voice.

She didn't seem to mind. She seemed to like to talk. Soon she was telling him of all her fine plans for the future of Valley's End, of the great things she saw when culture and education should change the town from a raw, boisterous boom town to a thriving city.

Listening, Wesley felt himself inspired. Now, something like that would be worth while. If a man could just settle down in a peaceful, constructive trade, if he had someone with whom to build a future—he stole a glance at Ruth. The wind was blowing her blonde hair about in a peculiarly fascinating way. The sun glinting off the tresses made them shine mirror-like.

He sighed. Yes, if a man had those things, this business of living could be truly worth while. But a woman like Ruth could have her pick of many men.

"Oh, I almost forgot," Ruth said suddenly. "There's going to be a spelling bee Saturday night."

"Spelling bee?" Wesley faintly remembered having participated in such a thing when he was in the third grade. But that

had been a long time ago. "Am I supposed to take charge of it?"

"Certainly. You read the words to the contestants and correct them when they spell wrong."

"I read the words out of a book?" he asked cautiously.

"Certainly." She laughed up at him. "You have such a peculiar habit, Mister Wesley, of making me tell you things that I'm sure you already know."

"I do it because I like to hear you talk," he said. "You have such a nice voice."

She blushed fiercely and changed the subject.

A spelling bee, thought Jonathan Wesley, as he paced up and down across his room later that afternoon, was nothing for a full grown man to be afraid of. Yet afraid he was. The thought of facing all those people, having to pronounce those long words whose meanings he couldn't even guess, made his knees go rubbery.

He stopped pacing. That was it. He'd get Hardrock to tutor him.

But Hardrock, he discovered, had other things on his mind. "You promised you'd teach me how to shoot," the big man reminded Wesley when approached about the spelling lesson. "Don't you think it's about time you started?"

Wesley glared. "All right," he gave in grudgingly. "If you'll promise to help me with the spelling tonight."

Hardrock promised, and they went down to the creek bottom a half mile out from town, where for a solid hour Wesley instructed him in how to draw and shoot a gun. Hardrock wasn't an apt pupil, and more than once Wesley felt like giving it up as a bad job. So long as the guns stayed in the holsters, the big ex-school teacher looked like a sure-enough tough hombre; he had a knack for wearing guns, a swagger to his walk that was mighty impressive. But when it came to drawing and hitting what he was aiming at—Wesley shook his head and hoped Slick Blackburn didn't get too curious.

Shooting at a three-foot-wide cottonwood tree at twenty feet, Hardrock ran into a lucky streak and hit it twice in a row. Wesley said they'd better call it quits for the day, on the strength of that.

On the way back into town, the big man was elated. The sound of the .45's booming and the feel of the heavy guns jumping in his hands had done something to him.

"Let's walk by the Breakdown Saloon. I'll give those boys a demonstration that will curl their hair."

Vehemently, Wesley protested. But it did no good. Past the Breakdown, Hardrock must go, and hoping that somehow he could keep him from completely giving away the game, Wesley went along.

It was late afternoon, hot and still, and most of the townspeople were loafing in shady spots along Main Street. Approaching the Breakdown, Wesley saw Slick Blackburn and some of his cronies standing at the saloon entrance.

Hardrock pointed at a sign, hanging over a grocery store some eighty or ninety yards downstreet, that said BLOMBERGERS GROCERY.

He spoke in a loud voice. "Mister Wesley, it looks as though they left out the apostrophe on that sign."

Wesley could only stare at him.

"I reckon," Hardrock continued, louder, "that I ought to fix it."

With horror, Wesley realized what he was about to attempt. He noticed interested expressions on the faces of Slick Blackburn and his boys.

Hardrock drew both guns. "Reckon I'll get a little target practice," he said.

Wesley's mind worked swiftly. At the distance they were from the target, a .45 slug would drop somewhere between three and five feet. Even in an expert's hands it would be an impossible shot.

"Don't shoot, you fool!" he snapped out of the side of his mouth. The warning

came too late—that is, almost too late.

Startled, Hardrock turned his head to stare at Wesley. At that instant his guns roared, both of them. Wesley winced as if he himself had been struck. He wondered if Hardrock had even hit the store. Then sudden amazement shook him. On the porch of the saloon, four ashen-faced men were staring at the sign.

Wesley stared, too.

"Crimenently!" ejaculated the cross-eyed one. "Right between the 'R' and the 'S'! An' he wasn't even lookin' where he was shootin'!"

Wesley saw it, too. But he couldn't believe it.

Hardrock yawned and stuck the Colts back into their holsters. "Reckon that's enough practice for today."

Wesley pulled himself together. "Yes," he agreed in his best school teacher accent. "Yes, that should be sufficient."

♦ ♦ ♦

IN HIS room, Wesley was pacing the floor. Hardrock had promised to drop in and help him with the spelling words this evening. But it was nine o'clock now and he hadn't shown up.

Probably Hardrock was busy being lionized by Old Man Storm and the rest of the citizens who had heard about the afternoon's shooting exhibition. It was still the talk of the town. It was on everybody's lips. Wesley had noticed even Ruth Storm casting admiring glances in Hardrock's direction.

He paced the floor again. What if Hardrock didn't come? What if he had to face all those people in his naked ignorance—to be shown up for what he really was? Panic shook him. Maybe he ought to skip town. Pack up and leave now.

Then he thought about Ruth and the fine plans she had for the future of Valley's End. His jaw set hard. He stopped pacing. By God, he'd make a fight for it. He'd make Peter Hardrock help him with the words or know the reason why. Taking his sixgun from its place of concealment in a dresser drawer, Wesley strapped it about his hips under the frock coat. If Hardrock couldn't be persuaded by words, maybe. . . .

Searching about town for an hour, he found no sign of Hardrock. Desperation seized him. Suppose Hardrock had pulled up stakes? No, surely he wouldn't do that, not being cock of the walk as he was now. But where was he?

To steady his nerves, Wesley dropped in at the Breakdown Saloon for a sarsaparilla. He found an obscure corner table toward the back and sat down. It was risky, he knew, for him to come into such a place—even for a sarsaparilla. A man with his reputation had to be careful where he was seen.

Sitting there quietly, he heard the murmuring of voices behind the thin partition. There was a tense, evil note in the tones that made him listen, senses alert.

"Tonight it is," somebody was saying. "Hardrock is courtin' that Storm gal. He'll be leavin' her place in an hour or so. We'll get him by the livery stable."

So that's where Hardrock was, Wesley thought. Courting Ruth Storm. For a moment his senses reeled as he absorbed the blow. He could think of nothing but big, blustering Peter Hardrock, sitting with Ruth. . . .

"I ain't too anxious to tangle with that gent," somebody was saying. There was respect in the voice. "He's poison, I tell

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you. See what he did to that damn sign?"

"Quit your whinin'. Sure, he's tough. But we got to get him 'for he ruins us complete." The voice dropped so Wesley could barely hear. "Anyhow, what chance is he goin' to stand against five of us? Hell, he'll never know what hit him."

Not a muscle rippled in Jonathan Wesley's smooth face. He got up without appearing to hurry and walked across the crowded room to the exit. But once in the darkness outside, he stretched his long legs out in swift, space-eating strides. In five minutes he was standing behind a tree just outside the Otis Storm yard.

When Hardrock at last left the house and started down the board walk toward town, Wesley drifted out from behind the tree and fell in step with him.

Hardrock gave a start. "Who is it?"

"Shhh!" Wesley took him by the arm and led him out of earshot of the house. Swiftly, he told him of the ambush which was planned. Hardrock listened.

When Wesley had finished, he grunted testily. "I don't believe it. They wouldn't dare try anything like that."

"No?" Wesley laughed without mirth. "You don't know the breed like I do. They're after you, Hardrock. The only thing you can do is scoot out of town as fast as you can go."

Hardrock was silent a moment, deliberating the words. Then he said, "I see what you're after now. You're in love with Ruth and want to get me out of the way. You're trying to scare me out." Confidence had returned to his voice now, and he was sneering. "Well, you'll have to try something else. I don't scare."

"You fool!" Wesley breathed. "You hopeless fool!" Helplessly, he stared at Hardrock. He shook his head. "Then if you won't listen to me, I guess I'll have to make you—"

"You won't make me do anything!" Hardrock snarled. His hand moved down clumsily. Coming up, it held a gun, muzzle very close to Jonathan Wesley's belly.

Wesley prudently moved back. Hardrock waved the gun.

"I guess I'm big enough to take care of myself. Furthermore, I've got a notion you're a fake and always were. From now on, leave me strictly alone. Or—" he accented each word heavily—"I'll let you have a dose of lead poison."

For the life of him, Jonathan Wesley could think of nothing to say or do. He just stared stupidly while Peter Hardrock, school teacher turned town-tamer, holstered his gun and stalked away.

The sound of his footsteps drifted off down the boardwalk. A sour smile twisted Wesley's thin lips. The fool had been warned. He was walking into his own grave, but he had been warned. And in Jonathan Wesley's code, if a man wanted to die, then it was his own business.

But only for a moment did Wesley stand there. Swiftly, he crossed the street. He broke into a run, moving silently, with no more noise than a shadow. Three blocks downstreet he passed Hardrock. His gun was in his hand now.

Hardrock was a hundred feet from the livery stable, moving along carelessly, whistling, when a sudden stab of flame from a dark alley-way shattered the dark. Instantly the street became a bedlam of sound, the heavy *caroomm* of .45's echoing from between the darkened bluildings.

Wesley flung a slug at the spot from which the first shot had come. An anguished scream rose, then died in a choking gurgle. Wesley dropped to one knee to steady his aim. He took his time, and every shot told. He fired at flashes, one shot to each. And almost as an echo to each roar of his gun, came answering moans as men died.

Then only one man was still firing. That man was Peter Hardrock. Both his guns were out now and he was shooting wildly, blindly, the stark fear of death in his trigger fingers. He fired until his guns

were empty. Then silence came down.

Jonathan Wesley smiled a grim little smile. In the shadow of the building, he stood and listened to the sound of excited voices, the pounding of feet as citizens came running downstreet to see what had happened. He saw Peter Hardrock standing there, an empty gun in each hand, staring stupidly at nothing.

Two men came rushing up to Hardrock. They flashed lanterns around and inspected the carnage.

"Dag-nab my left footed bunions!" one of them breathed reverently. "He got 'em all! Slick Blackburn, Cross-eyed Pete, Red Dog—all of 'em!"

"An' not a scratch on him!" said the other citizen. "Goshamighty, Hardrock, how did you do it?"

Still grinning, Jonathan Wesley faded into an alley-way and headed for the hotel. Peter Hardrock could take care of himself from here on.

♥ ♥ ♥

DARKNESS was settling over the Crooked Tree schoolhouse. The children had long since gone home, but a lamp still burned inside the school room. Hunched over a speller, Jonathan Wesley stared bleakly at the long list of big words.

He sighed. Tomorrow night was the big night. But he wouldn't be here for it. He'd be slipping out first thing in the morning; before daylight would be best. Before the citizens started stirring and picking up the subject of how Peter Hardrock had civilized Valley's End where they had left off the day before. Before they started talking about what a wonderful match Peter Hardrock and Ruth Storm would make.

A sound at the schoolhouse door aroused him from his gloom. He turned his head slowly. Then he stood up and bowed.

"Howdy, Miss Storm. Pretty late for you to be up."

Dark eyes shining in the lamplight, she came into the room.

"Mister Wesley, I was wondering if you'd do me a favor."

"Anything, Ruth." It slipped out before he could catch it. Yet Ruth didn't seem to be startled, and because she wasn't and because so many words had been piling up inside him for so long, Jonathan Wesley just let them come out as they pleased. And before he had finished near half of what he had to say, she was in his arms.

"I've been wondering how long it would be before you said it," she told him.

"Said what?" he finally stammered.

"That you loved me. A woman can see such things in a man's eyes long before he ever says them."

"But Peter Hardrock? I thought—"

He felt her shudder at the name. "A gunman like him? Oh, he frightens me to death. I sent him away." She smiled up at him. "But you—you're so gentle."

After a while he got things straightened around a bit in his mind. Except one. What happened when she found out the truth about him tomorrow night?

In his arms, she stirred slightly. "Jonathan."

"Yes, dear?"

"That favor I wanted to ask you. Would it be asking too much to . . . if I . . . if you. . ."

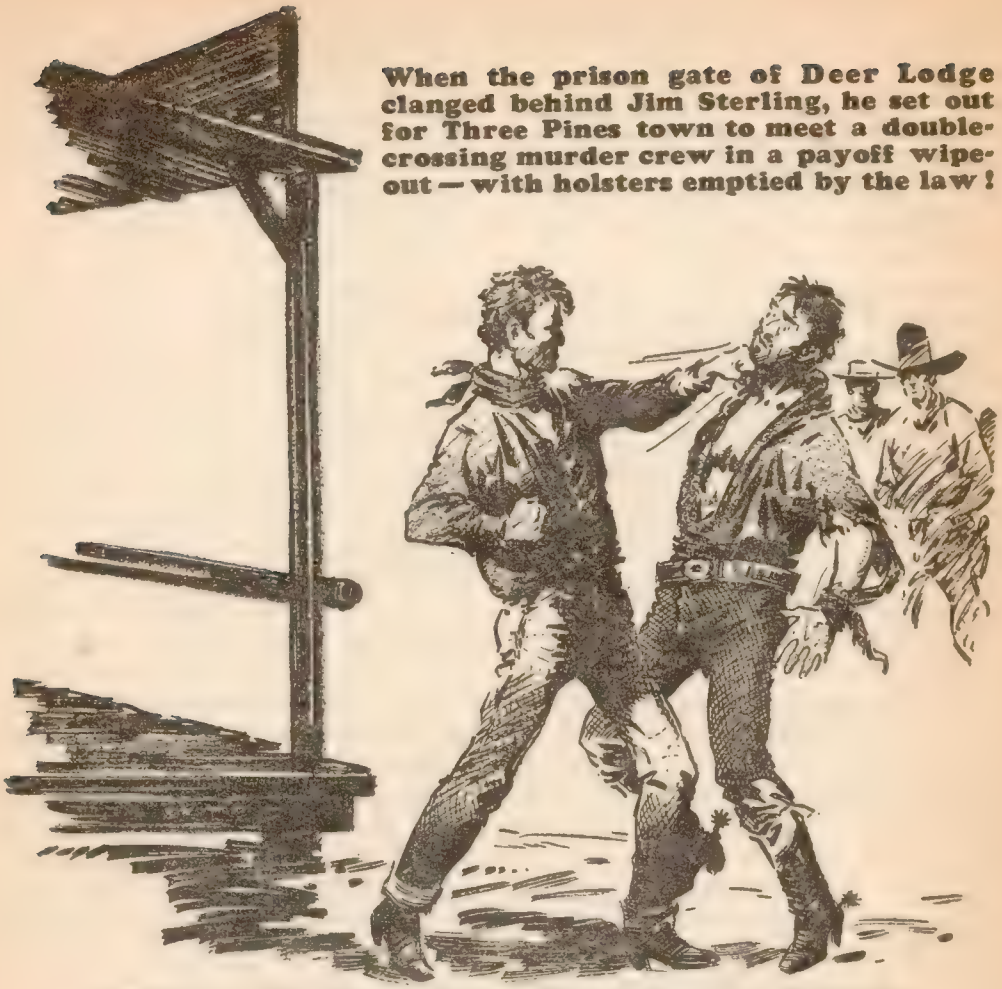
"Yes?"

"Oh, Jonathan, I just love to conduct spelling bees. Would you let me take charge of the one tomorrow night?"

Jonathan Wesley took a deep breath. Then, so it would appear he was considering, he took another. "Why, it's a bit irregular. But—yes, I guess you could."

She kissed him quickly, before he could change his mind.

When the prison gate of Deer Lodge clanged behind Jim Sterling, he set out for Three Pines town to meet a double-crossing murder crew in a payoff wipe-out — with holsters emptied by the law!



A straight, ram-rodding left fist, fast and crushing, smashed hard on Webb's jaw.

EQUALIZER from DEER LODGE

By LEE FLORIN

JIM STERLING was welding a hinge for a cell door when the guard came across the prison yard. "Warden Shaw wants to see you, Jim," the guard said.

Sterling's gray eyes showed surprise. He was a tall, wide-shouldered young man with a heavy chest. "What's the matter?"

"Warden'll tell you."

"Wait'll I put out my forge."

Sterling doused the red-hot hinge in cold water, sprinkled some more water on the forge's coals, and followed the guard into the warden's office. Warden Shaw, short and gray-haired, sat behind his desk.

"Sit down, Sterling," he said.

"I'll take it standin' up, sir."

Shaw smiled. "It's not such bad news, Sterling. You're done here. You're a free man."

Sterling stared. "What do you mean? I was sentenced for life."

Shaw got to his feet and walked to the window. He stood looking out upon the cell-yard for a long moment, then turned to face Sterling, who stood beside the desk, his face hiding his emotion.

"Tinsley's dead," Shaw said softly.

Sterling's face was impassive. "Yes?"

"He died in the hospital, two days ago. You prisoners never heard about it, because I ordered that it be kept secret."

"I see," Sterling said slowly. His face was calm, but his thoughts were many, and the heavy hate died within him. He could never kill Tinsley now. But now he was free, and he could kill Tige Kebler. "Did Tinsley talk?" he asked.

Shaw nodded. He took a legal-looking paper from his desk, handed it to Sterling, who read part of it and said, "A pardon, sir?"

"Yes," Shaw said. "But not a full pardon, Sterling." He pointed to a paragraph near the document's end, and Sterling read it.

"I have to report to a sheriff's office every three months—and I can never wear my guns." Sterling looked at the short warden. "Is that it?"

"Yes," Shaw said.

"Did Tinsley tell you who really robbed the Three Pines' bank?"

"No."

"Tige Kebler an' his men robbed it. Tinsley was with 'em. Kebler hated me, an' he saw a way to get shed of me. He planted those stolen bills in my room. He paid Tinsley to lie on the witness stand, but Tinsley lied so well the jury got suspicious—and he went on trial, too."

Shaw glanced sharply at him. "Forget that, Sterling."

"How can I?"

Shaw looked away and shrugged. "Well, you're free—but don't pack a gun, understand? 'Cause if you do, back you come."

"Do you still have my guns?"

"Yes . . ."

"Then give them to me." Sterling spoke almost harshly.

Shaw debated mentally. "All right," he said. "They're your guns, you know." He went to a wall shelf, took the heavy .45s and gun-harness out, wiped the dust from them, wrapped them in an old newspaper. And as he worked he said, "You're a good blacksmith, Sterling, and I'll miss your work. Forget your guns. You've got a girl somewhere, haven't you? The Governor said something about her when he signed your pardon."

"She has been fightin' for my freedom."

"Marry her, and settle down. Start a shop in some cowtown. But don't go back and buck Tige Kebler's guns. Stay out of Three Pines!"

"Might do that."

♦ ♦ ♦

TEN minutes later, his guns under one arm, he stood on the gravel roadbed outside the main entrance gate, and heard the heavy steel portal clang closed behind him. Then, his pardon resting comfortably in his coat pocket, he started down Deer Lodge's main street. When he was passing the postoffice the bald-headed postmaster stuck his head out the window and called, "Hey, mister, come here."

Sterling halted. "You mean me?"

"Yuh Jim Sterlin'?"

"I sure am."

"Gotta a letter for you."

"How come it didn't go to the prison with the mornin' mail?" Sterling asked quickly.

"Forgot it. I was jes' gettin' set to leg-it up there, when a gent tol' me they was turnin' you out today. An' seein my pins ain't what they used to be, I figgered I'd wait fer yuh an' save myself the walk."

The letter ran as follows:

Dear Jim:

Enclosed find two hundred dollars, and buy a horse with it and ride into Great Falls. You'll meet Charlie Myers in the Mint Bar, and he'll have a job for you on his Sun River outfit. I am selling my shop here, and I'll meet you there as soon as God will let me.

Please, Jim, for my sake—don't come back to Three Pines! Tige Kebler and his gunmen will kill you! Please, please, please, don't!

Cathy.

Standing there in that sunny street, Jim Sterling re-read the letter, his face graven and stony, his inner battle raging. Finally he pocketed the money and went to the livery stable, where he bought a stout sorrel horse and a good second-hand saddle. Then he mounted and rode south—toward Three Pines. And when he rode into that cowtown four days later, his bronc was leg-weary and covered by dry grimy dust—and he had a dead man tied over the saddle behind him!

A group of riders—hard-case, gun-toting men—stood in front of the Bootstrap Saloon, their eyes probing him as he rode abreast the place. And when Tige Kebler—a short, barrel-like hombre—stepped from the group and started into the street toward him, Sterling drew rein and sat silent in the saddle.

Kebler halted ten feet away, his Justin boots planted firmly in the heavy street-dust, his piggish eyes narrow and hot under his heavy, crag-like eyebrows. His voice was low and even. He glanced at the dead man.

"What happened, Sterling?"

"He got shot."

Kebler said, "You'll go back to jail, then. You're not supposed to use a gun, you jail-bird!"

"Did I say I'd shot him?"

"If'n you didn't, who did?"

Sterling said easily, "I sure don't know, Kebler. He was layin' dead in the trail, with a bullet-hole in his brisket, so I just toted him into town."

Kebler blustered. "You kilt him!"

Sterling's tone hardened. "Can you prove that?"

"No . . ."

"Then keep your lip buttoned!"

Kebler stiffened and moved forward, hands on his holstered guns. And Sterling, still mounted, said, "Don't pull those guns, Kebler!"

Kebler drew back his hands, his fingers clenching, unclenching. Anger washed over his beefy, florid face. "Buckle on your guns," he said hoarsely.

Sterling grinned. "The law won't let me," he reminded.

"Buckle 'em on anyway!"

"An' go to jail? You'd like that, wouldn't you! I'd be playin' into your hands, then!"

Kebler growled, "That pardon bar you from usin' your fists?"

Sterling's smile widened. "Nope," he said.

"Okay," Kebler snapped. He moved in swiftly. He came close to Sterling's bronc, and his right hand snaked up, aiming to jerk Sterling from the saddle. Sterling put all his weight on his off-stirrup, pulled his free boot from the ox-bow, and kicked Kebler on his square jaw.

Kebler staggered backwards, tripped over a rut and sat down. Hurriedly, Sterling dismounted and came up to him. "Get on your feet!" Sterling snapped.

Kebler braced himself and started up, blood trickling between his set lips, his eyes hot with hate. Just then, though, a man moved out of the crowd, stood between them. He wore a marshal's badge.

"No fightin' here," he said.

♦ ♦ ♦

HE WAS a stranger to Sterling, and Sterling studied him momentarily, noticing that his face lacked character, that he was not a leader. He was a puppet pulled by other men's hands.

Sterling said, "An' who are you?"

"Luke Gant."

"An' where is Mark Williams?"

"Mark Williams is dead," Gant said. "A bullet stopped him, a year ago. I take it your the ex-convict, Jim Sterling. We don't want fightin' in this town, Sterling. Remember that."

Sterling smiled and said, "It would look bad for Tige Kebler to shoot and kill an unarmed man here on the street where everybody could see him, wouldn't it?"

"It would," Gant agreed. Anger flooded his hatchet-face suddenly, and his breath came quickly. "You mean to imply that's why I stopped this scrap?"

"Take it as you like it!"

"By God," Gant blustered, "I oughta make you eat that, Sterling!"

Sterling spoke so low that only Gant and Kebler heard what he had to say. "You two are in cahoots—a blind man can see that. Well, jes' stay outa my way, an' we'll get along good . . . maybe."

Kebler started forward and Gant said, "Later, Tige, later," and his voice was a danger-laden, silken purr.

Kebler hesitated. "Okay," he finally said.

Gant stepped close to the dead man, there on the horse. The hombre lay on his belly, and Gant took him by the hair and lifted his head. He looked at him for a long moment, his lips hard and fine in his narrow face; then he let the head drop and started untying the corpse.

Nothing more was said. Then, carrying the body between them, Gant and Kebler entered the Bootstrap, and Sterling went to the livery barn, leading his tired horse.

He grained and fed the beast, then moved down the main street, conscious of many eyes on him. He smiled somewhat bitterly. Thinking in this manner, he entered the millinery store.

Cathy was alone in the store, and when he entered she did not move from behind the counter to greet him—she just stood there with her face somewhat paled, her knuckles white as she gripped the counter edge.

"Oh, Jim, why did you come back?"

He did not answer immediately. Momentarily he stood there, drinking in her dark, liquid beauty, thinking of those long empty prison years, and how only the thought of her—and the thought of killing Tige Kebler—had kept him sharp and hard.

"I had to, Cathy."

"But it'll mean guns and death," she said. "And you—you aren't even allowed to pack your Colts."

He smiled. "I'll find a way," he promised.

"How?"

"I'll find it."

She turned and walked to the window and he followed. "I had to come back," he said softly. "I can't tell you why, Cathy. But if I ran, if I had gone to Great Falls, if I had waited for you there—I'd have to live with that thought as long as life was in me. I'm only a man, Cathy. And a man can't live with that eating and burning inside him."

"Then you are only a cheap killer?"

"No," he said.

Widelegged, he stood there, gaunt and dusty and tough, balancing this problem in his mind, as he had balanced it so many times before. And, as ever, he reached the same conclusion. To him, a man, the solution was simple, but to Cathy, because she was a woman, it was a riddle, an enigma.

But the inner man has to be fed. He has to be satisfied. And you can't satisfy that inner person if you dodge your obligations. You have to be a man, or else your actions do not justify themselves. You have to fight and build and seek some reconciliation within yourself.

But could he tell Cathy that? And, if he did tell her, would she understand? No, she wouldn't. So, thinking this way,

he held his words and said only, "I'm sorry, Cathy."

She seemed to read his thoughts. She came closer and said, "Oh, Jim, maybe I'm wrong." She bit her lips hard. "Yes, I hope so, Jim."

"I hope so, too," he said.

♦ ♦ ♦

STERLING left then, and went down the sidewalk to the Town House, where he got a room. He bathed and donned clean clothes and then, the stiffness gone now and a sort of content arising inside, he went downstairs to the dining-room and ate.

He was a marked man. He knew that. Kebler had marked him for death, and either Kebler or one of his gunsters—or even Marshal Gant—might be the man who would kill him.

Every second he spent in Three Pines was freighted with danger. And, as long as Tige Kebler remained alive, that danger would be ever-present. There was, after all, only one solution to his problem. Kill Kebler.

For, with Kebler dead, the Kebler gunmen, only hirelings and stooges, would not take up their dead boss' fight.

Jim paid the waitress, went outside. Standing there, idly picking his teeth, he let his gaze run over Three Pines, noticing that the town had changed little.

A gray-haired woman, bent with the silent weight of the years, came out of the General Store, and Sterling walked forward, meeting her on the corner.

"When did you come back?" she asked.

He told her.

"But why did you return?"

He said, "To kill Tige Kebler."

"It isn't worth it, Jim."

He said, "I had to, Mrs. Holyoke. I was thinkin' of Matt Holyoke, and I couldn't let him down."

"But Matt's dead. And what you do now, makes no difference to a dead man." Tears trembled on her lashes. "Please take Cathy, and leave town, Jim."

He shook his head stubbornly. "Kebler killed Matt, and Matt was my best friend. He was working in the bank that day Kebler and his masked men held it up. And they murdered him in cold blood—and they laid the blame on me. Can a man dodge his obligations Mrs. Holyoke?"

"No," she said slowly.

She turned slowly then, and hobbled down the street, with Sterling standing there, watching her go, mingled emotions tugging at his thoughts. Then he pushed this aside, and turned when a man, coming from the Bootstrap Bar, called his name.

Sterling said, "What'd you want?"

"I'm Webb," the gunman said.

Sterling smiled. "That's nice," he said. "But where does it put me, mister?"

Webb frowned deeply. "You never heard of me?" he demanded.

"Reckon not."

Webb said, "I'm the man who killed Tim Starr."

Sterling nodded. "Tim Starr was fast."

"He *was*," Webb declared.

"Well?"

Webb's voice was a husky whisper. "Tige Kebler says he wants you either dead—or headin' outa this burg."

Sterling understood, then. "An' you're here to carry out Kebler's orders?"

"I sure am."

Eyes lidded, Sterling faced him, seemingly at ease, yet tense and taut underneath. "I pack no guns," he said.

"Strap some on," Webb advised.

Sterling laughed bitterly. "An' go back to a cell!"

Webb shrugged. "Kebler owns Marshal Gant. An' Gant, bein' the law, tol' me an' Kebler he'd let you strap on your guns, and' he'd forgit it in his report to the governor, when he writes in about you gettin' killed."

"Nice of him," Sterling agreed.

Sterling spoke easily, but his agile mind was busy. It was all clear, now. Crystal-clear. Gant wanted him to strap on guns —wanted to have Kebler and his gunsters down him. Kebler had ordered that to Gant. For Kebler, because of the bank-robbery, because of the killing of Matt Holyoke, had to get Sterling out of the way. For Kebler didn't know how much the dying Tinsley had said, back there in the prison hospital. And, for all Kebler knew, maybe he, Sterling, had come back not to kill him, but to get evidence to submit to the governor—evidence that would convict Kebler of that bank-robbery.

Suddenly, Webb snarled, "Are you leavin'—or are you fightin', Sterling?"

Sterling's answer was abrupt. It was a straight, ram-rodding left fist, fast and crushing, that smashed hard on Webb's rocky jaw.

Webb went back against a saloon wall. Sterling moved forward, eyes narrowed. Webb cursed and flung out a wild, desperate right. Sterling blocked it and pushed in, and hit Webb again.

Anger roared through Webb. Standing there, fists up, blood seeping down his jaw, he fought savagely, forgetting he owned guns. A hard left beat on Sterling's ribs.

The blow staggered him. Nausea poured through him. But, hurriedly, he whipped up his failing strength and bored in. He blocked a right, ducked a left, and hit Webb twice.

Webb braced himself solidly, pushed himself from the building. He came forward then, eyes narrowed, lips tight. They fought savagely, bitterly, there on that plank sidewalk.

Townsfolk watched them. Tige Kebler and a gunman stood before the Bootstrap. Kebler stood spraddle-legged, his eyes hard, uncompromising. Marshal Gant stood in the doorway of his office, watching the fight through narrowed eyes. But Cathy was not on the street . . .

One of them had to go down, and it was Webb. Beaten, bloody, he rolled over, hand sneaking for his holstered .45. Swiftly, Sterling booted the gun from his grip and then, stooping, he pulled Webb's other Colt from holster, tossed it into the dust.

"Get up!" he snapped.

Webb got slowly a-foot, mouthing curses. Sterling, breathing heavily, twisted him around, pushed him. Stumbling, staggering, Webb lurched down the sidewalk, heading for Kebler and the gunman.

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Now Sterling moved forward toward Kebler, and Gant came down the walk and joined Kebler, too. Anger burned hotly in Sterling. He tried to control it, to hold it, but it roared inside, a consuming flame. He halted before them and said, "I've had enough, hombres."

Kebler's heavy brows lifted cynically. "Yeah . . . . Well, you'll see a lot more, if'n you don't saddle an' ride danged *pronto!* What's your answer to that?"

"This," Sterling said, and hit him.

The blow was deadly. It picked up Kebler, turned him, dumped him in the doorway—stunned and almost unconscious. Then, before Gant and the gunman could move, Sterling had Kebler's guns.

"Get in there!" he ordered the gunster.

The gunman, face pale, stepped inside. Grimly, Sterling covered Gant.

"My father settled this range, Gant.

He fought Indians, drought, prairie-fires. Men like him built up this country, made this town. They were honest, God-fearing men. They whipped this country into shape. Now dogs like you an' Kebler have moved in, now that it is easy-living. An' you've polluted the air they breathed. Now, get outa town!"

Gant paled. "You're packin' a gun."

Sterling smiled easily. The anger had settled determinedly, now, and it was cold-hot, heavy. "I know that. An' no man-made law, however strong, can keep me from it. Kebler'll pay for this!"

"An' me?"

"Saddle, an' ride!"

Gant laughed. "Humph!"

Sterling said no more. Swiftly his gun rose, the barrel slammed across Gant's flat forehead, splitting the skin and bringing blood. The lawman's knees buckled. He went down, unconscious.

Shouldering him, Sterling carried him down-street. There, at the livery barn's watering-trough, he pushed the lawman into the water, doused his face. Gant finally came to. Sterling jerked him up.

"Get inside," he said.

Stumbling, dripping water, Gant rocked into the livery-stable, where Sterling made him saddle a horse, made him mount.

Sterling asked the gray-haired hostler, "Got a rifle, Mack."

"I sure have, Jim."

Sterling broke the rifle's breech, verified its loads. Then, to Gant: "Now, ride, you hellion! An' remember I'm standin' in this door, watchin' you go. Make a move to circle back into town, an' I'm killin' you!"

Gant said, "I'll kill you for this."

Sterling grinned. "I'll chance that."

Gant swung his bronc and laid home his spurs and rode from the back door, his cayuse at a long lope. And Sterling stood there with his rifle upped, watching the man until he was only a dot, hurrying across the prairie.

"He'll never come back," the hostler chuckled.

"He better not."

Sterling turned suddenly, for ten men had entered the rear door. Swiftly he catalogued them as townsmen, and he went toward them. One, a small man, took the duties of spokesman for the group.

"Kebler an' Webb's gunnin' for you, Sterling."

Sterling studied them—he knew them all. "Anythin' else?"

The man was plainly nervous. He said, "We're jes, family men, Jim, but if you need any help—"

Sterling understood. "You don't cater to Kebler, then?"

The man swore savagely. "We hate the killer. You run him outa town, an' we'll see you don't get back to jail."

Sterling nodded, his eyes appraising them. This was backing he needed.

"We'll see you clear," the man said. "An' if you need any help, we'll organize a vigilance committee—"

"Thanks," Sterling said. "But it's my job, men."

"But there's two of—"

Sterling repeated, "It's still my job."

They exchanged glances, and heads nodded. Then, without further words, they wheeled and left by the back door, and Sterling went out upon the sunny street, heading for the hotel.

♦ ♦ ♦

HE WENT to his room, unwrapped his guns. He buckled the heavy leather harness securely around his thin waist, tied the heavy holsters solidly to his thighs. Then, standing there, he drew and redrew the guns—drew them until they seemed to leap from holsters, facets of sunlight reflecting from their smooth, blued barrels. Satisfied, he checked his leads and went outside.

Silence lay heavily over Three Pines. He moved to the corner, conscious that no man moved on the plank sidewalk, that no horses were tied to hitchracks. And, when he was opposite the bank, Kebler and Webb stepped from the Bootstrap, their guns up and running red.

Something tugged at Jim Sterling's sleeve. A bullet whammed into the wooden bank, drawing a scatteration of splinters. Turning swiftly, Sterling's guns leaped up, and roared.

Webb had a reputation as a gunman. But that reputation died when one of Jim Sterling's bullets, whamming across that dusty street, beat into Webb's heart, sending the gunman staggering forward, his guns hanging idly in his drooping fingers. Webb staggered forward ten feet, dead in his boots.

An unseen force smashed into Sterling's ribs. The hard blow turned him slightly. And, as he turned, he fired twice.

Both bullets hit Kebler. His knees slumped; he tried to raise his sagging guns. Momentarily, he stood that way, hanging between life and death. And Jim Sterling, his face harsh and like granite, powdersmoke swirling from his hot pistols, waited coldly, but waited in vain.

For Kebler never fired again. Bullet-shock released him, suddenly, and he fell on the sidewalk, crumpled and dead.

There was a stunned, awed moment. Slowly, the gun-roar died. Then townsmen were thronging the street, and Jim Sterling was standing braced against the bank, his face pulled with pain. Cathy reached him first.

"Jim," she said.

He said. "He got me in the side."

She put her arm around him. "I'll help you to the doc's office."

Her arm was solid and strong about his belt, and he leaned his weight against her. And then another arm was around him as a townsman hollered, "Here, you, stand back. Give him air! Get the doc in his office!"

Then he was going up-street, braced between Cathy and the man. Somewhere, a man was hollering, "Hell, nobody saw Jim Sterling packing a gun!" Other voices, hotly indignant with feigned anger, answered, "Nobody saw him—an' the man that says he did is sure a big liar!"

Cathy asked, "How are you, Jim?"

"Fine," he said. "Fine!"

"VIVA CHINA!"

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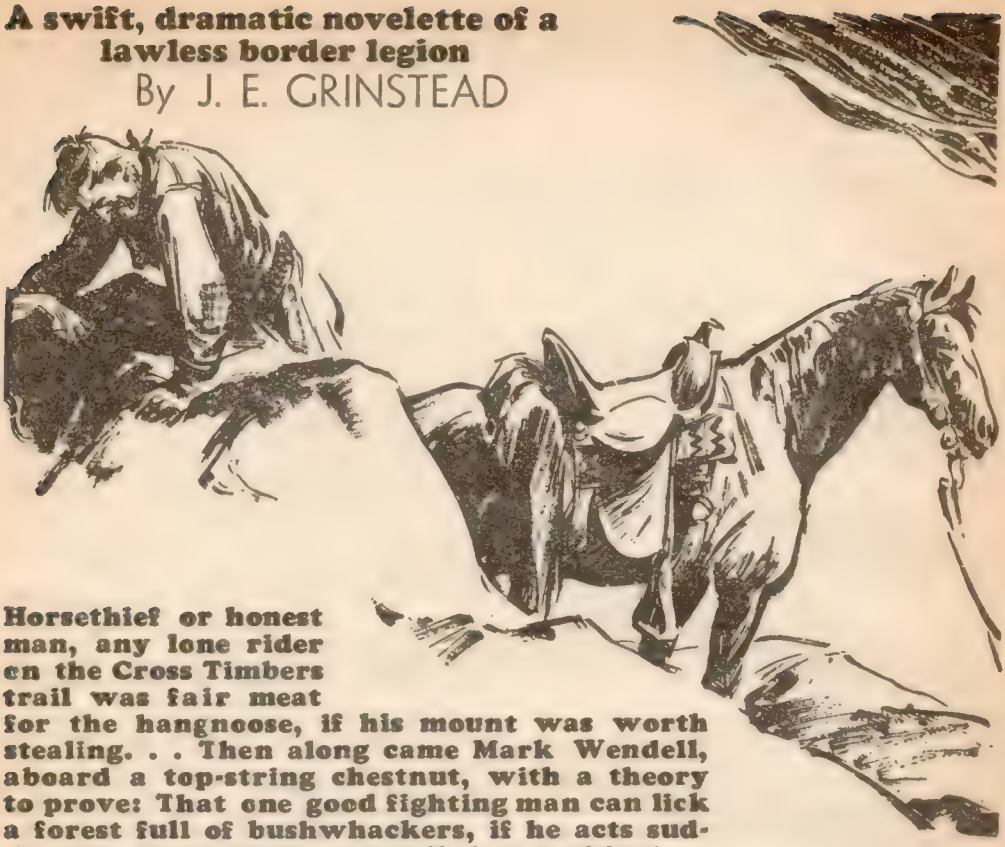
A swift, dramatic novelette of a lawless border legion

By J. E. GRINSTEAD



Horsethief or honest man, any lone rider on the Cross Timbers trail was fair meat for the hangnoose, if his mount was worth stealing. . . Then along came Mark Wendell, aboard a top-string chestnut, with a theory to prove: That one good fighting man can lick a forest full of bushwhackers, if he acts sudden, shoots straight—and tells 'em nothing!

The Great Horsethief Syndicate

CHAPTER ONE

Hangman's Wilderness

MARK WENDELL looked like a horsethief, in spite of the fact that he was fairly handsome when he had that mat of curly brown whiskers off his face. As he swung down from his big chestnut Glencoe horse, at the little store by the side of the old Cross Timbers trail, he looked furtively along the trail in both directions before he entered the building.

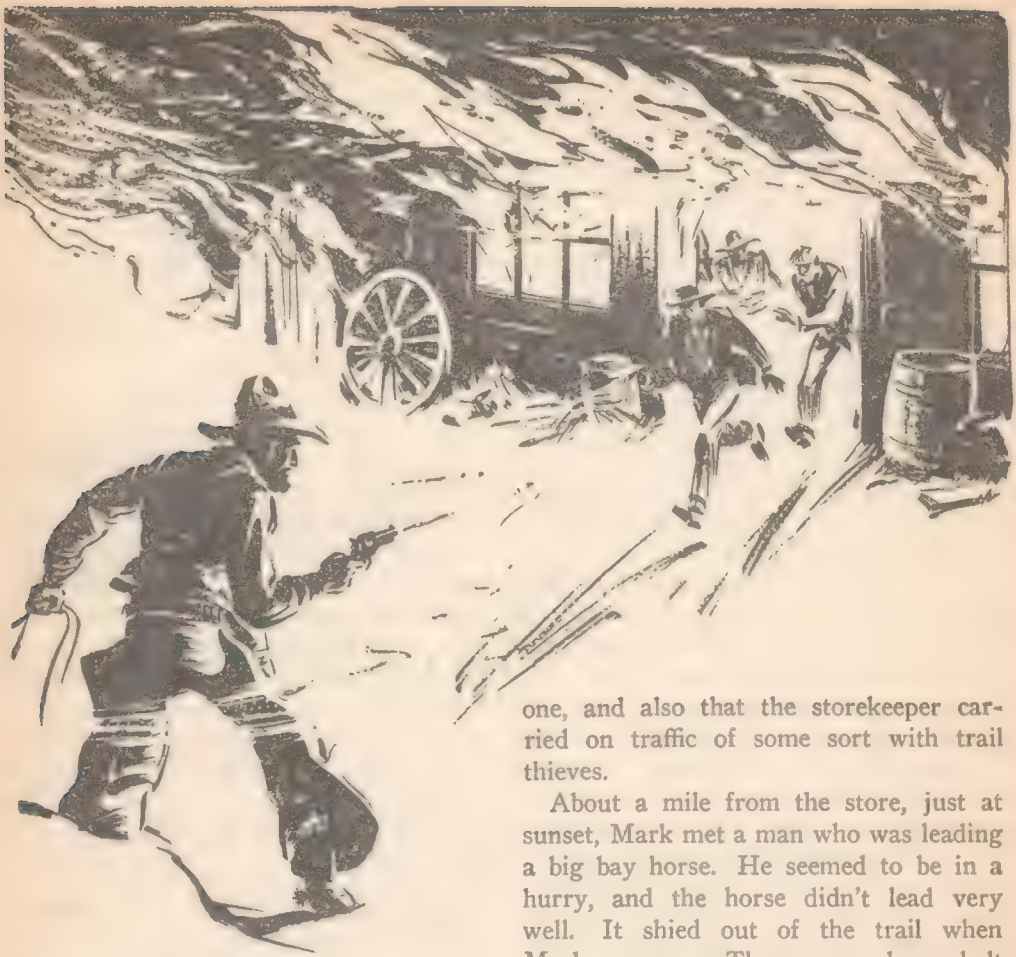
Skinny Evans, the merchant, had been watching Mark through the dirty window. He was a spidery, rat-faced rascal, with thin whiskers. When Mark called for tobacco, papers and matches, he produced them without comment. Then Mr. Evans followed Mark to the door.

"Good looking Glencoe pony you got there, pardner," he said. "About six year old, and worth a hundred and a half if a feller could get away with him. You don't work this trail regular, do you?"

"I aim to," replied Mark.

"Good business, but sorter dangerous right now. Vigilantes is on the prod." He stepped to the horse and pulled back the check of the bridle on the left side.

"What are you looking for?" asked Mark.



He stuck a bullet in Nate's knee, just to keep him from going too fast.

"C Brand. Your critter ain't got it. Old Bill Bowmer is apt to jump you as you pass his place, but all he looks for is that C. When you get into Dolman, hunt up Hunch Grimes, and he'll tell you what you want to know. Find him at the livery stable."

"How far is it to Dolman?" Mark asked.

"Only ten mile—if you don't get hung before you get there. So long, and good luck."

Mark grinned in his whiskers as he rode away. A lot of people had told him he looked like a horsethief. It was plain enough that Skinny Evans thought he was one, and also that the storekeeper carried on traffic of some sort with trail thieves.

About a mile from the store, just at sunset, Mark met a man who was leading a big bay horse. He seemed to be in a hurry, and the horse didn't lead very well. It shied out of the trail when Mark came up. The man made no halt and gave no greeting, which was unusual on those wild border trails. Mark took a close look at the outfit and went on about his business. He was now on a twenty-mile stretch of the Cross Timbers Trail where anything could—and often did—happen.

He guessed he had ridden five miles, when he came out into an open space in front of a substantial log house. A giant of a man was standing by his horse in front of the house. It was growing dark now, but Mark could see the man swing to his saddle, ride out, and stop across the trail. Mark guessed that this was Bill Bowmer, and that he was going to have to pass inspection.

"Hi'yer, pardner," greeted Bowmer, as Mark pulled up. "Hate to trouble you,

but I got orders to take a look at all horses that travel this trail."

"Go as far as you like," Mark said.

"Slick as a mole," pronounced Bowmer, after looking, then running his hand over the horse's jaw. "If you're heading for Dolman, it's only five mile, but you ain't got much chance getting there alive, the way things are."

"What's the matter with this section?" asked Mark.

"Horsethieves and vigilantes. Plumb epidemic of stealing, and now the C Brand organization has took it up, and are hanging about everything they catch."

"Oh, they are? That reminds me that I saw some forked fruit growing on a postoak tree, back the trail a ways. Gent was hanging right over the trail."

"What kinder lookin' feller was he?" asked Bowmer.

"Young chap. Twenty-one, maybe. Light hair, blue eyes, gray flannel shirt and California pants. Brown hat on the ground, with snakeskin band. Half-rigged saddle close by, but no horse in sight."

"Why, that—that was Elly Yates, one of my hands. I—"

Mark heard a sort of gasping sob on the other side of the high rail fence, and the next moment he glimpsed a woman running toward the house. Bowmer didn't seem to notice her, and went on: "I'm a lieutenant of the C Brand organization in this district. The vigilantes have been hanging 'em where they catched 'em with a C Brand horse. Now, when a thief finds out he's got one, he turns it loose wherever he happens to be. A dozen of 'em have been left on my range. I found the owner of all but one. Elly was riding it. Looks like some over-zealous member of the association hung him."

"He shore looked like he had been hung, and right lately, when I got to him. He was still limber. Reckon I'll head on for Dolman."

"I reckon you won't," snapped Bowmer. "When a gent finds a man dead in this section, he goes along to prove that he didn't kill him. I ain't chargin' that you killed Elly, but you are going with me to look things over. Come on in and get something to eat. Then we'll ride back and have a look."

THE house had two great rooms at the front, with an open entry between. Bowmer led the way into the room on the left. Two women sat by an open fireplace, for the November evening was cool. Obviously they were Bowmer's wife and daughter. He called the girl Clemmie, and told the woman to fix the stranger some supper. The woman left the room. Bowmer said he would go tell some of the boys to hitch up a wagon.

When he was gone, Mark looked at the girl. Her face was tear-stained, and her eyes had a moist glint as she sat staring into the fire.

"I'm shore sorry I brought you such bad news," said Mark, in a kindly tone. "I didn't know you were out there, or I wouldn't have told it so raw."

"Oh, that was all right," she said. "I'm used to such things, but—" She choked back a sob and stopped.

"But Elly meant more to you than anyone else."

"No," she said, drying her eyes and trying to smile, "it wasn't that. Elly was a good boy, and a good friend. You might not know it, but good friends are scarce along this border right now. The vigilantes suspect everybody. Thieves are working on our horses. Dad belongs to the vigilantes, but some are complaining about him because he doesn't want to hang every stranger that comes along."

Although Mark didn't say so, he was very thankful for that. But he had yet to convince Bill Bowmer that he had not killed Elly Yates.

In spite of the tragic situation, and almost without realizing it, Mark was glad that Elly had been no more than a friend to the girl. The reason for that feeling was right before his eyes. Clemmie Bowmer was pretty enough to attract any man, but there was more than beauty in her face. There was a look of intelligence, and of profound judgment in her eyes. Mark looked at her and wondered, but he could find nothing more to say.

Suddenly she turned to him and said, "I know dad thinks you are a horsethief, and that you may have killed Elly, but I don't think you did. I don't ask what you are doing on the Cross Timbers trail at night. All I ask is that—I know that every moment dad is away from the house, he is in danger. Plenty of people want to kill him. I—I've got to tell you. Riding with my dad is more dangerous than being a horsethief. I don't know why, but he is always being shot at, and some day they'll get him. While you are with him, please watch—"

She didn't finish. Bill Bowmer came in from the entry, just as his wife called Mark in to supper. Mark ate hastily. For some reason, he wanted to get out of that house as quickly as possible. By the time that he and Bowmer were mounted, the wagon had gone on down the trail.

"Lead out," ordered Bowmer.

It was a wagon road, and they could have ridden side by side, but Bill Bowmer was taking no chances with this stranger, who had found one of his hands hanging in a tree. He might belong to a band that had stolen Elly's mount, and gone on by another trail.

They had almost reached the scene of the hanging when they passed the wagon, and led on toward the spot where Mark had seen the body. He hoped it was still there, for he had an idea that Bill Bowmer was not the sort of man to play tricks on. They were within a hunded yards of the scene of the hanging when a gun roared in a thicket to their right, and a bullet cut a limb right over Mark's head.

Then something happened that Mr. Bowmer didn't expect. Mark whirled his mount and headed straight for the thicket, throwing a barrage of lead ahead of him. Bowmer joined in, and that thicket was a pretty hot spot for a moment. With their guns empty, they heard three horses tear away from the other side of the brush tangle and head south along the trail. Presently the silence was broken by a gasping, close at hand.

"Huh," Bill Bowmer grunted. "Looks like we got something in that thicket."

The wagon had come up, with two grim, leathery old punchers in it. "Bring your lantern, boys," Bowmer called, "and let's take a look at what we got."

They found a dead man. It was his death rattle that they had heard.

Bowmer swung the lantern until the light fell on the man's face. "Well, I'll be damned. That's one of Dave Faulk's cowhands. Why would he want to kill me?"

"Mistook you for someone else, likely," offered one of the cowboys, called Carter.

"Maybe so," admitted Bowmer. "Anyway, he can't tell us anything about it. Lay hold and put him in the wagon. You can bury two about as easy as one."

When the body was in the wagon, they went on and cut down the body of Elly Yates. Nobody spoke while they were doing it. His hat and saddle were thrown into the back of the wagon, and Bowmer growled, "Head out for home, boys, and don't talk to anybody about what has happened tonight."

♠ ♠ ♠

THE wagon rolled away, but Bowmer made no move to mount. Instead, he said to Mark, "Now, pardner, you and me has got to have a little talk. I ain't got no way of knowing that

you didn't kill Elly first, and hang him afterwards. You didn't tell me about that bullet hole in his forehead when you described him so complete. Looked to me like it was you that them gents in the thicket wanted to get. They cut limbs all around you. It might be a good idea for you to come clean with me."

"I've been clean with you all the time," Mark said calmly. "I just haven't told you all I know. About a mile before I found the young chap hanging in the tree, I meet a gent on a brown horse. He was leading a bay with one white hind foot, a star on the forehead, and a C on the left jaw."

"What! Why, that was the horse that Elly was riding! What was the man like?"

"Around forty. Slightly hump-shouldered, reddish brown whiskers, and a small black hat mashed in at the top."

"Hell!" snorted Bowmer. "That's a plumb photograph of Dave Faulk. He might of hung Elly, without knowin' who he was. Dave is one of the vigilantes, and the worst hanger in the lot. I can find out if it was him. Just mount and lead on to that little store. If it was Dave done the hanging, that lets you out."

Mark led on toward the store. There were a lot of things on his mind, and one was that he'd had a plenty of this high-handed stuff that Bill Bowmer was pulling. They had almost reached the store when they pulled up. Three horses were storming on down the trail, away from the store, in the other direction.

"I want to talk to Skinny Evans alone," said Bowmer. "But I'll be fair. You pull in behind that clump of cedars this side of the store, and you can hear all that's said."

Mark didn't know whether he could hear from behind those cedars, but he meant to hear all that happened. So, by the time Bowmer reached the front of the store, Mark had slipped from his saddle and pushed through to the bushes at the side of the small, frame building.

"Hey, Skinny!" called Bowmer. And, when Skinny Evans stepped out on the narrow porch: "Who was them gents that rid away from here just now?"

"Plumb total strangers to me," Skinny replied.

"Yo're a liar," roared Bill. "They was some of Dave Faulk's hands. What did Dave want when he was here just before nightfall?"

"Hold on, Bill," Skinny whined. "You talk too fast and too loud. Dave wanted to see me about C Brand business, and I can't talk about it out here. Come on in the store, and I'll tell you."

Bill Bowmer swung to the ground, his saddle squeaking in the darkness. He followed Evans across the narrow porch. There was but one candle in the dingy little store, and that was toward the back. Evans stepped aside, to let Bowmer pass in first.

There was the smack of a sharp blow. Skinny Evans fell inward to the floor, and a gun clattered on the rough boards. Bowmer whirled on the balls of his feet, and went for his gun. Then he stopped dead. He was looking into the cold muzzle of a six-shooter, and the colder gray eyes of Mark Wendell.

"Hold it, mister," Mark said. "Get your hand away from that gun. We are going to have a gab-fest. You have been riding me like I was a busted bronc, and now I'm going to ride some. I don't want to kill you, but don't think I can't do it if you mess with that gun."

"Why—why, what happened?" stammered Bowmer.

Mark grinned. "Nothing much. That little rat had a gun within six inches of your back. He was ready to pull the trigger, when I hit him. Anybody that would turn his back on that skunk in the dark is just plain crazy. I spotted him for a thief and a killer this afternoon when I first saw him. Don't worry

about him now. He'll sleep for some time, because I hit him on purpose. Now you tell me about this C Brand business. What's the mystery about it?"

CHAPTER TWO

Gunfire at Midnight

"THERE'S no mystery about it," declared Bowmer. "The ranchmen along this border were losing too many horses, so they organized for protection. The association had another name, but 'C Brand' is shorter and most people call it that. It is simple enough. All a man had to do was to pay five dollars a head to have the C put on the left jaw of his best horses. That made him a member of the association, and obligated him to report any horse he saw with the brand, unless the one who had it could produce the proper papers.

"Then, a while back, a plumb epidemic of horse stealing broke out. Every district of the C Brand association has a captain and a lieutenant, and every member is obligated to join the vigilantes if they are needed. Well, Anse Collins is captain of this district, and I'm lieutenant. Every member in the district belongs to the vigilantes, and most of them are active. Dave Faulk is one of the most active among 'em. He hangs on suspicion.

"What puzzles me right now is Skinny. He's a member, and his job is to watch this trail here at the store, same as I do at the ranch. You must be mistaken about what Skinny was doing."

"Could be," Mark admitted. "But if I was you I'd rather wait and ask him when he wakes, than to have waited to see what he was going to do. How did you get members for this C Brand outfit?"

"Oh, fellers that wanted a job just rid the country and solicited. They got forty percent of what they took in. Every time they branded a horse they got two dollars, and they worked pretty hard."

"They would," Mark said thoughtfully, as he picked up Skinny's pistol and threw it back on a base shelf. "They wouldn't investigate the character of the men who joined, either. I'm not knocking the organization. It may be a good thing, but every time you got a man like Skinny Evans into it, you got a wrong member."

He looked sharply at Bowmer. "Here's something between you and me that I want settled. You didn't go to the trouble to tell me your name, but I know you are Bill Bowmer, that you are a ranchman, and that you at last think you are honest. I'm Mark Wendell, and that's my real name. I'm not a thief, and I'm not usually a killer. My guess is that you are being played for a sucker, and somebody thinks you would look better dead. You and me are in a jam right now, and we'd better hang together. I'm willing to trust you, if you are willing to trust me." Mark put out his hand, and Bill Bowmer gripped it.

"I've seen you work," Bowmer said, "and I'll take you."

Mark took a look about the store. He was hunting for papers, and he found some. He held up a pad of blanks and asked Bowmer what it was.

"My God!" gasped Bowmer. "Those are blanks for the transfer of C Brand horses. I don't see what they are doing here. Nobody but the clerk of the district can issue them."

"Somebody has issued one from this pad," Mark told him.

He held the pad close to the candle. A blank had been filled out with a hard pencil and a heavy hand. When the light struck it right, the impression left on the next blank could be read. It was a transfer of the big bay that Dave Faulk had been leading when Mark met him that

evening, made out to one Dave Faulk.

"Why, damn him!" grated Bowmer. "He has hung a dozen men for less than half what he has done. Come on. It's only two mile to his ranch, and I aim to call him on that, right now. It's a cinch he's the one that hung Elly Yates."

"Hold the deal," cautioned Mark. "Let's finish this little job before we take on another one. That gent on the floor is apt to wake up and tip our hand. If we hope to clean up this mess we'll have to stomp our snakes as we come to 'em, and—"

Mark broke off, as Skinny Evans sat up on the floor and gaped owlishly.

"Wha — what happened?" grunted Skinny. He felt of the knob on his head, then looked at his fingers for blood.

"You went to sleep," Mark said. "Have a nice nap?"

"Skinny," Bill Bowmer said soberly, "you leave us no choice in the matter. We've got to hang you. You have been giving out transfers to stolen horses and—"

"Hold on, Bill," protested Skinny. "Yo're crazy. I'm a member in good standing of the C Brand. Dave and me works together. I locate 'em, and he hangs 'em."

"Yeah?" grunted Bowmer. "You got a pad of transfer blanks, and you issued one to Dave for that bay horse that Elly was riding when Dave murdered him. Then a while ago you tried to shoot me in the back as I walked into the store ahead of you. So—"

"Just a minute, Bill," begged Skinny. "Let me talk. I—"

"Nope. I know too much already."

♥ ♥ ♥

LATER, with their backs turned to the lifeless body that hung from a joist inside, Mark Wendell and Bill Bowmer stood in the doorway of the little store. "Now," said Bowmer, "we got to go on to Dave Faulk's ranch and get—"

"Get killed," finished Mark. "I'm too young to die. Couldn't you get Dave to come here? Don't a little bunch of you vigilantes have meetings sometimes?"

"Shore we do. I didn't think of that. You just wait here. I'll ride over to Dave's place and tell him that four of us met here at the store. That we had some cases that we couldn't agree on, and want him to decide on 'em. He'll come."

"If he wants you dead, as bad as I think he does, he'll kill you. Better let me go with you."

"Nope. He'll be afraid to kill me, because he'll think the other fellows might come to look for me. It's safer to go alone. You just hide your horse and wait here."

Mark listened to the *clop, clop* of Bowmer's horse as he rode away, with the mental note that Bill Bowmer was dead game. He hid his horse in a thicket, then waited in the darkness just outside the store.

It was an hour and a half before he heard them coming. Mark didn't know what they had been talking about, but as they pulled up near the store he heard Faulk say, "I'll settle it quick enough. My motto is: 'When in doubt, hang 'em,' and it shore works. There's no hereafter about it." They dismounted then, and Faulk blurted, "Hey! I don't see any horses. What is this?"

"It's a gun in your ribs," snapped Mark, as he stepped from behind a tree, "Get your hands up. That's it. Thanks for the gun. Now go right on in to the party."

Bowmer led the way. Faulk stopped just inside the door, stared at Skinny's body dangling from the joist, and turned to run. Mark shoved him on, closed the door and locked it.

"What—what do you fellows want?" Faulk stammered.

"You," Mark said. "You have been pretty handy with a rope. You have been hanging 'em as you catched 'em, when all the time you belonged to the meanest band of thieves on this border."

"You—you can't prove nothin' on me."

"No?" growled Bowmer. "We can prove that you murdered Elly Yates and stole the horse he was riding."

"It was a C Brand horse," Faulk said. "He didn't have no papers, and I hung him, like always."

"Yes, and you got Skinny Evans to issue a transfer to you. It's all up, Dave. What other members of the C Brand are in with you?" Old Bill Bowmer was boring into him with his hard blue eyes.

"You go to hell!" rasped Faulk. "If you know so much, you ought to know that, too. This vigilante outfit is rotten clean through, except for a few fools who think they can get somewhere by being honest. All I ask is to be tried by a committee of vigilantes. They'll clear me."

"Yo're being tried by a committee of vigilantes," Bowmer said grimly. "A committee of one, and the verdict is in. You are a dirty liar. I know the men who belong, and most of them are on the dead level. You are a thief and a murderer, and I'm going to hang you."

Faulk fought desperately, and the little store was in a mess when it was over, but he had no chance. When Bowmer and Mark closed the door and left the place, two men hung from the joists of the little store, and they were two of a kind. . . .

Bill Bowmer had accepted Mark as a square-shooter, and they rode side by side along the wagon road that led back to Bowmer's ranch. After a silence that lasted until they passed the tree where Elly Yates had been hung, Bill Bowmer spoke.

"Mark," he said, "this is the beginning of a damn big cleanup. We didn't find out who else was playing in with Dave and Skinny, but I will find out. Anse Collins, the captain of this district, owns the Diamond C ranch, and he is as square a man as ever lived. It's about twenty mile to his ranch, and I aim to ride there and lay this mess before him. There's only forty members in this district—thirty-eight now. Anse can get 'em all together, and we'll weed out any that are wrong. I know all of them, and there can't be half a dozen more bad ones. We got to get rid of them, before they give the C Brand a bad name."

"You are right about all that," admitted Mark, "but if you break into it alone, before you get a band of vigilantes with you, you'll be killed, and no good done. You need somebody that you can tie to. I can't go with you to the Diamond C. I have some business in Dolman that I've got to attend to."

"Huh," grunted Bill. "The time won't come when I'm afraid to ride any trail in this section, day or night. I'm beholden to you, though, for what you done. Hadn't been for you, I wouldn't found out what I did. You've put the string in my hand, and I can plumb unravel the whole mess. I ain't askin' why you are going into Dolman. I thought at first you was in the horse business, but I know now that you ain't. All I got to say is that if you jump something that you can't handle, yell and I'll come to you."

"Thank you," Mark said. And that ended the conversation.

It was midnight when they reached the ranch, but there was still a light in the house, and Mark noticed that it looked blurred. A chill had crept into the damp air of the November night, and a fog was forming. Bowmer insisted that Mark spend the rest of the night there, and go on to town in the morning, when he could see what he was doing.

Mark accepted, but Bowmer didn't

take him to the bunkhouse. They passed it, after unsaddling their horses, and went on to the house. The wagon was standing near the bunkhouse, with a wagon sheet spread over it. Obviously, the two dead men were still in it.

The two women still sat by the fire when Bowmer led into the room where they had left them. "This gent is Mr. Mark Wendell," Bowmer said. "My wife and daughter, Mark. Get us some hot coffee before we go to bed."

That was all. Mrs. Bowmer made the coffee. They drank it. No reference was made to where they had been, or what had happened. Bowmer took Mark across the entry to the company room and told him to make himself at home. Within five minutes Mark was in bed, and within one more he was asleep.

♦ ♦ ♦

MARK didn't know how long he had slept, but he woke sitting up in bed, as someone hailed the house. He heard Bill Bowmer step into the entry and call, "Who's there?"

"Anse Collins," came the reply. "Come out here. I want to talk to you, important."

"Soon as I get my boots on." Bowmer went back into his room.

Mark leaned over and put his face against the window. It was dark as the inside of a boot. Suddenly, it occurred to him that he would like to hear what Bowmer might have to say to Anse Collins, so he began dressing noiselessly, with the intention of slipping out into the fog and listening.

He heard Bowmer step off the gallery. He had just put his hand on the doorknob, to ease it open, when a shot crashed. followed by a tempest of roaring guns. The fog was so dense that the gunflashes didn't show on the window. Before Mark could turn the knob he heard the voice of Clemmie Bowmer, calling from the other side of the entry: "Mr. Wendell!"

"Here," said Mark, opening his door.

"Oh, thank God!" she gasped. He didn't know it, but she was expressing her thanks that it was not Mark who had fired those shots. The firing had ceased, and horses were running away from the place. "I'll get a lantern, and we'll see what happened."

A moment later she returned with the lantern, and they walked out to the gate together. Mark had taken the lantern from her, knowing that it made a good target if the killers were still about. He was pretty sure of what had happened, or Bowmer would have been yelling for him.

Bill Bowmer lay on the ground just inside the gate. He seemed to be out, but not dead. As Mark and the girl reached him, Carter and his partner came running around the house. The light of the lantern glinted on a gun in Carter's hand.

"You can put up your gun, Carter," Clemmie said calmly. "The killers are gone."

They took Bowmer up and carried him in the house. A bullet through his right thigh had grazed the bone; one had burned the top of his left hip; another had broken his left arm; and one had creased the top of his shoulder at the base of his neck.

When Mrs. Bowmer saw that no lead had gone to the inside of Bill, she threw a cupful of hot toddy into him. It brought results. His eyes snapped open, and he called one of the two cowboys.

"Frank, straddle a horse and go get old Doc Sanders. He ain't much of a doctor, but he can set a bone. I don't want none of you to go to Dolman for a doctor. I need all the hands I got left."

The ranchman was hurt pretty bad, but the blood had stopped, and a second helping of the bitters eased him. He said to Mark, who was sitting near, "That didn't

sound like the voice of Anse Collins, but I thought maybe the fog made it sound that way. I knowed somebody wanted me killed, but didn't think they would jump me here at the house. Get the lantern, Carter, and you and Mr. Wendell go out there and take a look. I think I tallied a hit."

Clemmie was standing at the foot of the bed. "Can I go with them?"

"Shore," husked Bill. "Go ahead. You can hold the lantern."

Clemmie went with them, but again Mark took the lantern.

They didn't have to look far for sign. Twenty feet outside the gate a man lay dead. The light flashed on his face and Carter looked at him.

"Huh. Another one of Dave Faulk's hands. Dave must be mad at Old Man Bill about something."

Mark turned to the girl and said, "Miss Clemmie, you better go back into the house. This isn't a very pretty thing to see. Carter, go to the bunkhouse and get some of the boys to help you put this fellow in the wagon with the others."

He handed the lantern to Clemmie as the cowboy walked away, and he stepped off a little way into the fog, as if looking for something more. Clemmie didn't go to the house at once. She wanted to talk to this stranger, wanted to know more about what had happened earlier in the night. She called to him softly, but got no reply. Presently she went on to the house, thinking that he must have gone on and joined Carter. She left the lantern on the gallery and went in.

Carter came back with some of the men and carried the body away. It was half an hour later that he went to the house. Clemmie came out to meet him.

He said, "Where is that Wendell gent at?"

"Why, I thought he was with you?"

"Not any," grunted Carter. "Something wrong about that gent. I didn't see him nowhere, so I take a look at the pens. His horse and saddle is gone. He just evaporated in the fog. Are you plumb shore he didn't have a hand in that gun stuff?"

"Yes," she said, in a puzzled tone. "He was in his room when it happened."

"That lets him out of that, I reckon, but he's tied up in this mess some way."

They went into the house and told Bill Bowmer that Mark was out of pocket, and his horse gone.

"Did you count the other horses?" Bowmer asked.

"Shore did. Ain't none gone but his'n and the one that Frank rid after the doc."

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"Well, I don't blame him for taking out," said Bill. "He told me once tonight that he was too young to die, and it looks like this is a good place for it to happen. You—you don't suppose it was him that them fellers thought they was shooting at."

"Might been," Carter admitted.

Dr. Sanders came in just then, and nothing more was said about Mark Wendell. In fact, they all forgot about him, except Clemmie. When the doctor had set the bone and dressed the other wounds, Bill Bowmer went to sleep, under the effect of an opiate. The doctor assured them that he would be all right, and went on back home.

Mrs. Bowmer lay down with her clothes on and went to sleep. Clemmie sat by the fire, careful to curtain the window so no one could see into the room if the killers came back. Thus she sat throughout the remainder of the night, wondering.

Who was Mark Wendell? What was he? Why had he slipped away in the fog like that? Would she ever see him again? Carter said he didn't look right, and she knew that at first her father had thought he was a horsethief. She knew Bill had changed his mind for some reason, or he would not have introduced Wendell to her and her mother. Why had Bowmer taken Mark's disappearance so calmly? Try as she would, she could find no answer to any of these questions.

CHAPTER THREE

Bait for the Hangtree

MARK WENDELL simply had saddled his horse quietly in the dense fog, and ridden away from Bowmer's ranch. There were plenty of questions in his mind, too. He had never seen a good man wanted as bad as somebody wanted Bill Bowmer. Why? Bill didn't strike him as a crook; just an easy sucker with a lot of sand.

Then he thought of Clemmie. There was a real woman. She had as much sand as Bill, and a whole lot more sense. Then Mark wondered if he would get out of that neck of Hades alive. And if he did, would he see Clemmie again?

Bowmer had said it was only five miles to Dolman. It seemed to Mark that he had gone ten miles. He figured he must be on the wrong trail. Certainly he had not passed the town in the inky darkness. Then he stiffened in his saddle. The peculiar odor of a town that has no means of disposing of garbage assailed his nostrils on the damp air. At the same time, the horse quickened its step.

Dolman lay in the bottom of a narrow valley. It was hard to believe that under that black blanket lay a squatter town in which every known human wickedness ran its course. Staring into the fog, it looked as if it were up hill in every direction, but Mark knew from the movement of his horse that he was going down a slope. Suddenly two yellow eyes showed ahead—lights gleaming through the fog. As he approached the larger one, he saw dimly the outline of a big square building. That would be the livery stable, he decided, and he thought of Skinny Evans telling him to look up Hunch Grimes.

As Mark pulled up, the wide door of the stable rolled open, and a man stood in it with a lantern in his hand. The light that Mark had seen was a lantern in a box, to guide people to the stable.

"Hi'yer, pardner," greeted the stableman. "Riding late—or early."

"Both," Mark replied gruffly. "Is Hunch Grimes around here?"

"He shore is, pardner. I'm Hunch Grimes. What about it? I don't know you."

"No, you don't. Skinny Evans told me that you could give me the dope on anything I wanted to know around Dolman.

I'm just starting to work on this trail."

"You picked a damn pore time to start," Hunch grunted. "You better go back and start over."

"I can't," Mark said. "There's too much behind me. What's the chance of getting across the river?"

"Pardner, that road from here to Red River leads straight to heaven, now. Old Anse Collins and his vigilantes are in that bend, and they are hanging as they catch. Tell me what you want and I'll see what I can do."

"Well, I want my horse fed, but not too much. Just loosen the cinches and hang the bridle on the saddlehorn. Then tie him in one of these open stalls close to the door. I may want to leave sudden."

"You are talkin' like you had good sense now," Hunch said.

"Is that other light another stable?" asked Mark.

"Nope. That's the undertaker's shop. It's always open."

Mark laughed. "Must have a good business."

"Plenty, but that ain't why the light's there. Nate Roddy owns the building, and he's got a room upstairs where he sleeps. He has right smart company, and the light is to show 'em where he's at."

Mark learned that he could get something to eat at a restaurant close by. He went to the place, got some coffee and a couple of boiled eggs. That was about the only food in the place that he was willing to risk. There were some bottles of whiskey on a shelf. Mark bought a pint, and took it back to the stable. It might start Hunch Grimes talking. He gave it to Hunch, with the remark that he didn't like to get all the favors.

Hunch bit off a slug of it, and his tongue eased up a bit. When he had got two good wings to fly on he was ready to go.

"Who do the boys go to when they get in a jam in this place?" asked Mark.

"Funny that Skinny didn't tell you that," Hunch said suspiciously.

"I think he was going to, but some fellows came in and he had to quit talking, so I just rid on."

"Oh, thataway. Well, I just about told you, anyway. It's Nate Roddy. He don't run the undertaker's shop, though he's got a face like a undertaker, and a voice like a preacher. But he ain't one. He's a member of the C Brand outfit, and he gives the brethren information—that he wants them to have."

It was coming daylight now, in spite of the fog. A saloon and dancehall took shape a little way up the street to the north. The stable was right in the trough of the valley. Beyond the saloon a big general store showed up, along with a saddle shop and various indeterminable buildings. Slowly the picture unfolded, and at last, fair in the middle of the street, and almost at the top of the slope a big tree waved its bare arms in the light breeze that was rising.

"See that tree," chuckled Hunch. "It has bore more forked fruit, as you call it, than ary tree in Texas. Men have been hung there plumb reg'lar since the C Brand vigilantes went on the prod. They bring 'em in here and hang 'em, then leave 'em for the town to bury. It's getting monotonous."

"Why don't Nate and his boys shoot the vigilantes up?"

"Huh? Did you ever try to shoot up a gang of vigilantes? If you haven't, don't. The only thing you can do with them gents is to run as fast as you can, as soon as you see 'em. They are on the kill, and they know how it is done. They—"

Hunch stopped, and his mouth fell open. A party of riders came over the crest of the rise to the north of town, and pulled up at the old tree.

Hunch swallowed hard and said, "They—they got one now. No, they got two. Watch 'em throw the ropes."

Just then a strange thing happened. People had swarmed into the street to watch the hanging. Most of them were ignorant, superstitious, and they thought what they saw was supernatural. It was talked of along that border for a long time, and in view of what followed it was thought by many to have been a warning from on high. . . . Some vagrant current of air broke a hole in the dense fog, and a spot of sunlight fell through, bearing on that old tree and the men around it like a spotlight, and picking out in bold relief the two men kicking their last at the end of ropes.

"I can't stand that," said Mark Wendell. "Here's where I ride." He swung into saddle. "I can't face what's behind me. I'm going to ride right by those fellows and head for the river."

"Don't do it," begged Hunch Grimes.

Mark paid no attention. He turned his mount and rode straight toward the hanging, gaining speed as he went.

"He looks like a horsethief," muttered Hunch, "but he's shore actin' like a dang fool. There'll be another one on that tree in about a minute. They won't even try to find out if he's guilty."

He rubbed his eyes, and watched Mark skid right into the middle of the mob. Of course he couldn't hear what was being said there. All he saw was that big chestnut Glencoe whirl and start back down the street.

It seemed to take the vigilantes by surprise for a moment. Then they dug in their spurs and gave chase, their guns roaring as they came on.

"Them dang fools are shooting over him," chuckled Hunch. "That's what happens when you shoot down hill. They'll get him when he starts up the rise if—Goshamighty! Watch that horse run!"

Mark shot past the front of the stable, and started up the long slope to the south of town. The guns were still roaring, and bullets whining overhead.

As the vigilantes swept by, Hunch cursed them, and snarled, "Go on, damn you! You might as well be afoot, far as catchin' that hossthief is concerned. If the Devil is ahead of that boy, he better get out'n the way or he'll get run over."

The vigilantes and their fleeing quarry faded out of sight, over the brow of the hill to the south.

♠ ♠ ♠

MARK didn't let the vigilantes come up to him until he was within half a mile of Bill Bowmer's house. Then he pulled up, and Anse Collins, as grim an old giant as that border ever knew, came alongside on his panting horse.

"Hey!" he called. "What the hell's your idea for a fool stunt like that? Didn't you know Bill Bowmer would stop you when you got to his ranch, or Dave Faulk at Skinny Evans' store?"

Mark grinned. "I shore didn't. I wanted to get you fellers out of town. Looked like—"

Wham! A gun crashed at the Bowmer house, followed by a storm of firing. The place was under siege. The vigilantes, now with Mark at Collins' side, tore toward the battle.

Clemmie was putting up a first-rate fight in defense of the house. The hired hands were all two hundred yards from the house, burying the dead from the night before, and she was alone with her wounded father.

Then Mark and the vigilantes opened up on the half dozen men at the gate who were firing on the house. Such a battle could not last long. Two of the killers were down, when the others tore away to the south. When the vigilantes pulled up, Anse Collins repeated the old story: "Why, them's two of Faulk's hands."

"They all was," said another of the

(Continued on page 107)

Bad Boy Travis learned from an old gunster the secret of how to enjoy a long and honest life—when he had only ten minutes more to live!

His right hand swung around as he halt turned, and the heavy gun cradled in it was menacing every man in the room.

HE WHO LIVES BY THE GUN . . .

By MACK MARTIN

BAD BOY TRAVIS rode carelessly and jauntily along Mesa's street, so young and small atop his big black horse that the last thing in the world he reflected was his grim trade. He'd been at the trade for four years, almost, working hard to get that Bad handle tacked on his nickname, but the 'Boy', and his pint size annoyed him. He felt he had to be twice as mean as older, larger men—and he had done pretty well along those lines so far.

Today was a red letter day, a chance to prove, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that he had guts of steel. Trigger Matson, the new gun chief of the Pelvy cattle crowd, was said to be hanging out in Mesa, and Travis had been hired to wipe him out. Legitimately, of course, by drawing second but shooting first. He proposed to do the job up in a style that would have made even that ring-tailed wolf, old Gunner Jason, his idol and his model, proud.

He reined in by the frame hotel and let his mount nose eagerly into the mossy trough, while his glance bored sharply at three silent men occupying chairs on the broad, roofed porch.

One of them got up, stretched, and moved leisurely forward, meeting Boy's gaze with steady gray eyes that were peculiarly bright. Age did not wholly account for the snow-white locks about his temples or the deep lines in his lean-clipped face. The heavy Colt in a tied holster, and more than that his impassiveness, his lithe carriage, the subtle wariness behind those relaxed muscles, conveyed the gunman far more cogently than the aspect of the young man on the horse.

Boy's expression changed. His lips cracked in a broadening grin.

"Well, whadda yuh know! My ol' pard, the Gunner! Say, I didn't recognize you, first-off, without them walrus whiskers." Boy's questions, then, sounded as though they came from a Gatling gun. "How come you've shaved? What you doin' anyway, way up here? Johnson County get too hot for you?"

"Nope," the older man said. "Business proposition . . . I've been around for quite a spell. Heard you was in these parts."

"Then why ain't you looked me up?"

"I kinda figured that sooner or later you'd be lookin' for me, son," Jason said quietly. "Ain't that why you're in town?"

"Hell, no! I didn't even know you was around." Boy's grin vanished. "I'm lookin' for a jasper named Trigger Matson. Know where he's at?"

The old man nodded. "What do you want with him?"

"I aim to kill him," Travis said simply. "Funny thing, I was just thinkin' about you, Gunner. I've improved my draw considerable, since we rode together in Johnson County, an' I wasn't too slow then, was I?"

"No, Boy . . . I was hopin' you'd changed your business, till I got up here. Seems you're makin' quite a name with Walt Sampson and his crowd. An' now you're after Matson. Well, he reckoned pretty fast himself."

"That's the point. Maybe you-all will drop the Boy, after I've settled his hash. I'm sure glad you'll be around to see *this* party, Gunner. You're goin' to like it."

"No," Jason said, "I'm not. I reckon I won't like it either way. You see—"

But comprehension was dawning on Bad Boy Travis. For an instant his stare was almost ghastly.

The old man nodded gravely. "The name of Gunner Jason is a handicap, sometimes. Tim Pelvy asked me to use another . . . I'm Trigger Matson, up here."

♦ ♦ ♦

BOY TRAVIS hadn't expected this sort of a test, but it wasn't going to phase him; not with his future at stake. In fact, it made his prospects brighter. To wipe out the fastest gunman in the Southwest would nail his reputation down forevermore.

His jaw set and his eyes narrowed as he said coldly, "I'm sorry, for old times' sake. But if you're Trigger Matson, you're the man I'm lookin' for. I told you I'd speeded up my draw considerable. Personally, I think I'm faster than you ever was . . . Want to call me?"

Jason's pale eyes had also narrowed;

his wiry body had seemed to flex. Yet his hands remained utterly relaxed. Finally he said, "Ain't you tryin' to bite off just a mite too big a hunk to chew, Boy?"

"Maybeso," Travis sneered, "but I'm apt to do some chewin' afore I choke. I hear they swore you in as special deputy, to protect this Boss Tim Pelvy o' yours. Scared to wear that little tin star in plain sight, are you? I notice it's pinned inside your vest."

He realized, then, it wasn't going to be easy to rankle Gunner into the first move. Indeed, Jason's voice, when it came, did not even show resentment. It was so low that it could hardly have carried to the men behind him on the porch.

"Boy, maybe you can wipe me out, an' maybe you can't. They say you've creased three-four men since you came up into this country, an' that you've always got by with a defense plea—which means you badgered 'em to drawin' first. You can't work that on me until I'm ready, and I ain't ready—yet. I want you to think it over, for one thing. For another, I *am* totin' a star. That means I'm supposed to keep the peace . . . So run along."

"There's some hands that needs washin' afore the law is handled right," Boy purred. "They're dirty, and they're bloody!"

"I've told you it won't work." Jason's tone was quietly impersonal. "I've learned the law is always right, even though I ain't always been on the right side of it. I tried to make you see that down in Johnson County, but—well, have it your way. The game will still be open at sundown, Boy."

He turned his back calmly and walked into the hotel bar.

Travis wrenched his pony's head from the watering-trough and rode down the street. He dismounted at a tie-rack and walked back along the plank sidewalk. Afoot, he appeared almost ludicrous, topped by the wide, peaked Stetson, his big .44 revolver sagging to his knees.

But he didn't feel comical. He was loaded with dynamite. He felt outraged, and likewise sorely perplexed, for he knew well enough that Gunner Jason wasn't afraid of him. The white-haired gunman was as impersonal about dying as administering death. His apparent reluctance to settle the issue in gunsmoke had Travis stumped.

To one thought, however, he held stubbornly. He had come to town to get Trigger Matson—and he wasn't going to leave until he did.

He clumped into the hotel barroom, his glance registering details only casually after he'd assured himself Gunner Jason was no longer there. Two armed men sat facing the bar in chairs backed against the wall. A quartet surrounded a card table in the rear. Another pair of men sat where they commanded a view of the partly opened doorway admitting to the hotel lobby. There was no conversation. The set-up struck Boy as unpleasant, but it didn't occur to him that it might be for his benefit; at least, not then.

He peered over the high bar into the tall mirror behind it. "Shake up two raw eggs in half a glass o' milk," he told the white-aproned attendant.

"You mean a Tom an' Jerry?"

"Two raw eggs in milk!" Boy rasped.

He looked steadily into the long mirror. The only section of the room not reflected by the glass was the extreme rear. At that end another door stood slightly ajar, directly in line with the long bar. Nothing escaped Boy's observation, now suddenly sharpened, while he appeared solely concerned with the frothy drink the bartender had set before him.

He lifted the glass in his right hand, and his swift movements thereafter defied segregation. Somehow he replaced the glass on the bar while flattening himself against the rail long enough for his left hand to unsheath a gun. With that gun

he placed one shot into the narrow crack between the rear door and its frame. His right hand swung around as he half turned, and the heavy gun it cradled was menacing every man in the room.

♣ ♣ ♣

THE DEAFENING explosions which shook the place, however, were not all produced by his single shot. Three weapons had been fired. His own shot was a snapping echo of the first two. A fountain of sawdust had erupted at his feet, marking the bullet from the gun of an ambusher lurking behind the rear doorway. The first of the three shots had come from the adjoining lobby room.

The man who had fired it was not visible to anyone in the bar, yet he might well have saved Boy's life by hitting the gun-hand of the ambusher.

As Boy fired, the back door banged shut from the weight of a body falling against it.

The adjoining door creaked fully open and Gunner Jason appeared. He crossed to the storeroom door, pushed it open with difficulty, stooped briefly, and re-entered the bar.

"Right through the eye . . . Boy, did you ever tangle with an hombre named Dan Henshaw?"

"Uh-huh, about a year ago," Travis said. "He swore he'd fetch me down some day."

"He kept the date," Jason said.

Boy nodded without a flicker of expression. "I saw his face. Why didn't yuh let him do your work for you?"

"I wanted you to leave town peaceable," Jason said evenly.

Boy curled his lips deliberately. "I figured you was tryin' to buy yourself out."

Pain flickered for an instant on the old fighter's face. The expression vanished, and he said softly, "All right, Boy, I see you're bent on a showdown. Since you can't rile me into drawin' first, and you're so set against drawin' first yourself, suppose we settle this like gentlemen. We'll stand back to back, then pace one step. That will keep it from bein' a foot-race an' at the same time give us room to turn an' draw. What do you say?"

"Why not?" Boy shrugged. "You just bought me off'n a sniper. You've a right to call the play."

Jason drew a large gold watch from his pocket and unhooked the heavy chain. "Dale," he called to one of the men who had been sitting against the wall, "Travis and I will step into the lobby. In just ten minutes you give us the signal by firin' a shot into the floor. Pete, you step out front an' make sure no one interrupts us."

"Why in hell wait ten minutes?" Dale demanded.

"We need it," Jason replied gravely. "At the end o' that time one or both of us may die. We need it to think about our sins."

No laughter greeted the strange remark. Its source, and Jason's tone, made it deeply serious. Dale took the watch and Pete strode ponderously outside. Boy Travis swung around the bar end toward the lobby door. His pudgy features showed no emotion, but his inward wonder at Jason's puzzling tactics had increased. The tall, white-haired gunman stalked behind him. They entered the small lobby and Jason closed the door. Back pressing against back, they assumed position.

"Empty all of the shells out of your shootin' iron except one," Jason said. "We'll make it so a fella can't afford to miss."

Brass cartridges beat a tattoo upon the floor.

"Nine minutes an' about twenty seconds," Jason said.

The intonation of the words, or perhaps a sudden flash of insight, tingled

Boy's spine. Now Jason's reason for the wait was clear! The old man thought that he could break his nerve.

Boy's lips twisted in a silent sneer.

♠ ♠ ♠

"BOY," JASON said softly, "I'm old enough to be your pa."

Travis scowled. "I ain't to blame for that."

"No, but I'm ol' enough to give you some advice."

"I used to think a heap of your advice in the old days," Boy said harshly. "But then you wasn't handin' out mush."

"Yes, I was, son, if that's what you want to call it. My notions ain't changed. You pulled out before I could dig under your skin . . . I knew your dad, Boy. I never got around to telling you. We rode a couple of wild trails together, him and I. He wasn't married then. I reckon you don't remember him, do you?"

"Naw!" Travis snarled. He was puzzled again but more than ever warily alert. "I was only a shaver when he got roped in the pen for life."

"And your ma, Boy?" Jason persisted. "Remember her?"

"Sort of." Then Travis flared, "Say, you ain't makin' me forget we're swappin' lead!"

"No," Jason said. "I'm waitin', too. Don't get the idea I've gone soft, son. It ain't so. But—well, for one thing, I knew the way your father really felt. He didn't like it, even in those days. He used to say, 'A jasper who lives by the gun has gotta die by it. If I ever have a son—' "

"I don't believe it!" Travis spat.

"Neither did I, until a lot later, Boy. I was kinda young myself, an' I'd been brought up in gunsmoke, just like you have. There's only one big difference between us, even now. I'm old. You're still young—young enough to cut another trail. Sixguns ruined your dad, Boy. Think what they did to your mother an' you . . . Well, time's runnin' pretty fast. Are you all set?"

"Yes!" Travis hissed between clenched teeth, for there was bubbling up in him an utterly new emotion. "Maybe I will quit gunnin', old-timer—if you're best man!"

A spasm of fierce rage whipped at the strange sensation which had been born in Travis' heart. Hell, this was all a frame-up, just a sob story to throw him off his guard! Instantly he became cool again, his whipcord muscles flexed and governed perfectly. He forced his mind to focus on that big gold watch, with a man bending over it, out in the bar.

Moisture beaded his forehead, but it wasn't from fear. It was eagerness for action. His lithe body twitched forward, for a quick step and spin-about.

"Easy, Boy," sifted Jason's calm voice. "We've got two minutes yet. I've timed this out before . . . I reckon there's another difference between us, come to think of it. I've got twenty notches on my gun, while you—Boy, did you ever plumb kill a man, outside o' that skunk Henshaw?"

"I—uh—I've drilled a-plenty!" Travis gulped defensively. "An' I'm sure going to kill another in a minute, Gunner!"

"Sure, sure," Jason said. "Maybe. It'd mean a lot to you. To me—hell, just another notch. Boy, don't you get it? If you cut that notch, and another, an' another, in twenty years or so you *will* be me.

"For every man you kill, Boy, you'll have to kill two more, till finally—you come to somethin' like this. I'm here because I've got too old to change. You ain't. You've only got that one notch on your gun. . . Say, I bet you ain't even saved up one red cent."

"I've got two thousand dollars," Travis gritted, "pretty near!"

He heard the old man chuckle softly. "Well, now, that's mighty fine. I bought

me a ranch once, but ain't never had the time nor notion to work it. I reckon, though, I'd be willin' to cut in a likely young hand—for about two thousand, say. Of course—"

"What's holdin' Dale?" Travis screamed. A storm of doubts had seared him. He was convinced that Jason was lulling him off-guard, and yet . . . Then something snapped—a loud report, though only the blood pressure in his reeling brain. With it he made one sprinting leap, drawing and aiming his gun.

Jason swung slowly and calmly. "You aim to beat the signal, son?"

Red shame bathed Travis' face. He jerked his gun-arm down and back. And in that fraction of a second an explosion crashed from the barroom.

Boy tried to raise his arm again, but it seemed paralyzed—even as he saw Jason's gun leap from its holster.

♥ ♥ ♥

FASCINATED, he watched Jason's gun swing to position. His chin snapped upward, proudly, and he squared himself to meet death.

Out of Jason's steely eyes, now, welled a warm, approving glance.

"Exactly what I wanted, son," the old man drawled. "You think you've lost, Boy, but you win. I'll tell you why. This town is packed with Pelvy's men. You didn't have a chance of gettin' out alive if you killed me. They're all outside, right now, just waitin' . . . I don't aim to shoot you, sonny. Put up your gun."

"No," Boy cried, "it ain't over yet! I'll kill you, Gunner, or you'll kill me, unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Listen!" Travis blurted It seemed as though words he never meant to utter ran away with him. "You said I still have time to take another road, an' you want me to. If it ain't too late for me to start right, then it's *never* too late to mend! I'll take you up on that ranch—*if* you throw in with me! Now, start shootin', Gunner Jason, damn you—or else shake!"

"Why, hell's bells!" Gunner Jason breathed. "You onery, pint-sized rannyhan! I guess you got me fair an' square!" He sheathed his weapon, grinning broadly, and extended his hand.

Pelvy's men were indeed waiting, impatiently, in a circle about the broad porch, when Jason and Travis stepped through the door.

"What's the idea?" one bawled.

Another growled, "Yah, 'one or both of us may die', he says, an' lookit—they're love-birds!"

A third guffawed, "I allus thought that half-pint was a false alarm!"

Boy's hand flashed downward, but Jason firmly gripped his arm. "Now, boys," the old man said, "I reckon you'd better get this straight. Travis came here to get the gun chief of the Pelvy crowd. He didn't do it for just one reason: Tim Pelvy ain't got a gun chief any more."

There was a sullen murmur, topped by a harsh, "What in hell d'yuh mean?"

"I spoke plain English, didn't I?" Jason asked softly. Somehow he and Travis were standing back to back again, but this time with a difference. "Meanin', I've resigned. Take this badge back to Pelvy, Dale. Me and Travis are ridin'."

The crowd bristled, until it met the eyes of those two men upon the porch.

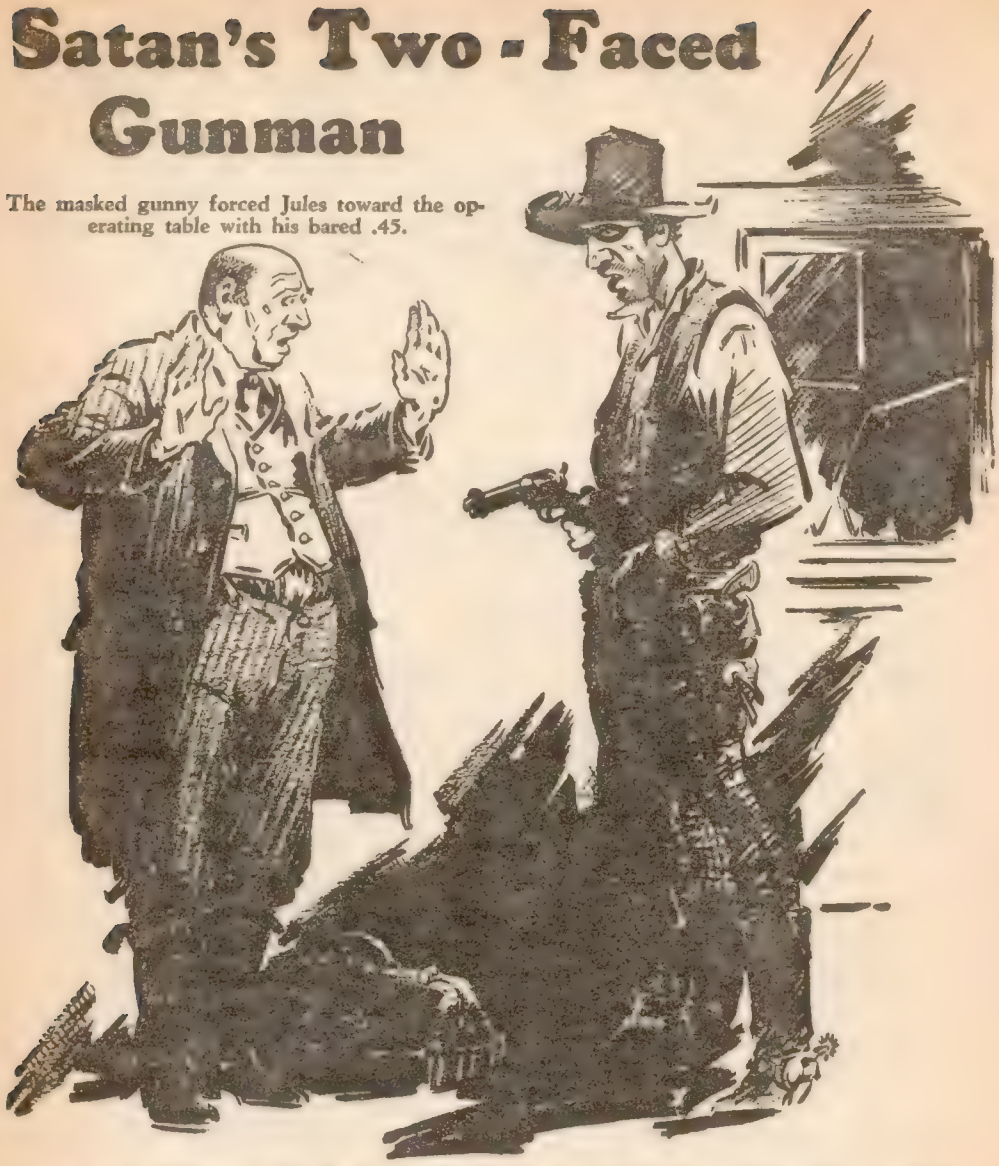
"Seein' as yuh think we've gone so soft," Boy remarked gently, "maybe someone hankers to find out?"

The murmur died to silence, which continued heavily as the tall man and the short one rode off lesiurely, the sun a-glint on their receding backs.

Each man had had one shell in his six-gun, back there in the hotel lobby. Two bullets to hold off the gun-pack.

Satan's Two-Faced Gunman

The masked gunny forced Jules toward the operating table with his bared .45.



All the world thought Jeff Pressley, cowman without a memory, was the dreaded Drake Chalmers, outlaw, because a prairie Frankenstein had marred his face and set him on a trail of involuntary pillage. But Pressley's master one day went too far, and ordered the looting of Jeff's graybeard father's home...

By CHARLES D. RICHARDSON, Jr.

THE man on the bed opened his eyes. The bandages had been removed, but at first he couldn't see a thing. He tried to move and found it painful. Gradually his pupils became accustomed to the light, and he began to make out indistinct shapes.

He saw two men—one tall and lean, the other decidedly squat, with glasses. The latter had on a white apron and rubber

gloves, was fingering a stethoscope hose dangling from his neck.

"I'm telling you, Rome," the small man was saying, "it's risky as hell. Supposing this duck here was to blab things, tell the sheriff he's—"

The gaunt Rome cursed.

"Who'd believe him?" he snapped. "With your operation changin' his pan to look like Drake Chalmers, it's a push-over. You an' me're the only ones in town who know Drake's dead. Them reward notices are still up offerin' five grand for Chalmers' capture. Any gent who looks exactly like him will be on a spot. The sucker'll have to play ball with us."

"Well, maybe you're right. But I still think—"

An involuntary groan from the patient made the pair turn. "He's coming out of it!" the little physician rapped. "Button your lip till we see if he remembers."

They helped the man on the bed to a sitting position. Rome gave him a drink of whiskey from a glass.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

The other took a deep breath, shook his aching head to clear it. For the life of him he couldn't remember a thing that had happened; how he'd got here, who he was—anything. One thing he did know was that the men before him were crooks.

But he still didn't know who *he* was. A name seemed on the tip of his tongue, teetering mockingly there.

"Who am I and what in hell you got me here for?" he muttered. Through an open door, he could see an operating table in the next room.

The lean Rome looked at the little doc and grinned. "Amnesia," his scarcely moving lips said. Then, to the patient: "Why, don't you remember? You're Drake Chalmers. The gunny six counties has been on the lookout for. You staggered in here to Doc's last night, with a posse on your trail. Remember?"

The little doc was also grinning. "You mean to say you don't remember me, Doc Jules, who saved your life? And Rome Aiken here, the gent that headed the posse off?"

"Say!" The sudden forward movement made the weakened man feel faint. "I ain't no gunny. I never saw you birds before. Listen. I heard you two tellin' how you'd changed my face. Dammit, what's goin' on around here?"

Doc Jules shook his head. "Bad case. Imagining things. We better keep him locked in here till we're ready for him. Don't want him forgetting what we'd like him to do."

Rome Aiken turned to the stricken man. "Chalmers, it's this way. We figger you owe us somethin' for savin' your worthless hide. We got a few odd jobs we want done. Robbin' some ranchers who're dinero filthy. We'll give you a small cut for yourself. Then you can drift on."

The runtish Doc Jules beamed. "We know you won't give us no trouble, Drake. You wouldn't want the sheriff knowing your whereabouts. He's been blabbin' his fool mouth off as to how he'd spend that reward money."

♦ ♦ ♦

A CURSE ripped from the man on the bed. He staggered to his feet, white face purpling. Instinctively, his right hand swerved down for his hip.

"You—" he coughed. "You skunks! You can't make me do that. You can't—"

Then he saw the two things Rome Aiken was holding forward. A large reward poster, and a mirror. The crooked nose, the puckered cheek of the face in the mirror tallied with that of the gent on the poster. WANTED—DEAD OR ALIVE screamed the big words immediately above the picture.

(Continued on page 98)

DO WE HAVE TO DIE?

A strange man in Los Angeles, known as "The Voice of Two Worlds," reveals the story of a remarkable system that often leads to almost unbelievable improvement in power of mind, achievement of brilliant business and professional success and new happiness. Many report improvement in health. Others tell of increased bodily strength, magnetic personality, courage and poise.

The man, a well-known explorer and geographer, tells how he found these strange methods in far-off and mysterious Tibet, often called the land of miracles by the few travelers permitted to visit it. He discloses how he learned rare wisdom and long-hidden practices, closely guarded for three thousand years by the sages, which enabled many to perform amazing feats. He maintains that these immense powers are latent in all of us, and that methods for using them are now simplified so that they can be used by almost any person with ordinary intelligence.

He maintains that man, instead of being limited by a one-man-power mind, has within him the mind-power of a thousand men or more as well as the energy-power of the universe which can be used in his daily affairs. He states that this sleeping giant of

mind-power, when awakened, can make man capable of surprising accomplishments, from the prolonging of youth, to success in many fields. To that eternal question, "Do we have to die?" his answer is astounding.

The author states the time has come for this long-hidden system to be disclosed to the Western world, and offers to send his amazing 9,000-word treatise—which reveals many startling results—to sincere readers of this publication, free of cost or obligation. For your free copy, address the Institute of Mentalphysics, 213 South Hobart Blvd., Dept. 176E, Los Angeles, Calif. Readers are urged to write promptly, as only a limited number of the free treatises have been printed.

(Continued from page 96)

"Use your head, Drake," Aiken said softly, "and you may live long."

For two more weeks they kept the man with the face of Drake Chalmers in the back room of Doc Jules' office. He gained strength rapidly, but his mind remained blank. That is, almost blank. The name Jeff came to him, in moments of agonized concentration. That was all, just Jeff. He knew his real name was Jeff, and that he had punched cows once, somewhere.

That was the hell of it. To know that much, and nothing more. Jeff ran his lean fingers over his crooked, newly-healed nose. Damn Doc Jules! To deliberately carve a man's face to resemble a killer! If he didn't knuckle, Rome and Doc would turn him over to the law. It would be a hangnoose for him then.

Jeff knew the pair wouldn't let him go when they were through with him. A slug between the shoulderblades would be Jeff's cut of the haul. Rome and Doc would drink heartily on the reward for bringing Chalmers in.

So it was that the puncher, Jeff, began his looting of the surrounding spreads. He relieved them of their cattle, their horses and their cash. He became a nightmare to every honest cowman's dreams. No one knew what night he'd be jolted out of a sound sleep with the news that his steers or prize broncs had been hazed off.

Rome Aiken, owner of the Blue Bottle City Hardware Emporium, and Doc Jules, the skilled little medico, shunted off the posses when they got too hot for Jeff. The lean storeman was at the edge of the woods to greet Jeff as the latter rode up from his last steal.

"Nice work, Chalmers," he purred, taking the bills Jeff handed him. "You've just got time for one more job. The big spread down in Toadstool Valley. Old gent there keeps his pile in a wall safe. You can force him to open it."

Jeff tore off his mask, brought his gun up. Grimly, the muzzle hovered before the face of the staring Rome.

"You damn snake!" Jeff whipped, breathing hard, his deformed nose twitching. "You can drive a man just so far. I won't pull another steal tonight!"

Rome was looking at the dew-beaded ground, at the moon floating overhead. "A good night to track a man," he said calmly. "Soft ground, light as day almost. When we don't come back to Doc's on time, he'll ride out to investigate. If he finds me dead, it won't take long for him to stir up Sheriff Carsby."

Jeff's gun muzzle lowered. Slowly, he readjusted the mask.

"Let's go," he said, and wheeled his pinto toward Toadstool Valley.

Aiken waited with the horses in the spruce grove a short piece from the ranchhouse. Slinking up in the shadows, on foot, Jeff inched carefully to the rear window. His hand was slithering over the sill when he heard voices within.

"Go back to bed, Sonny," a throaty old voice said. "Gettin' nigh on to twelve. You orta been asleep three hours ago."

The other's tones were eager, piping. "Aw, gee, Grandpop, lemme stay up a little longer. I wanna see you pepper that Chalmers gunny's pants. Doggone! I'll bet my pop woulda scotched him proper."

JEFF heard shoes scrape inside. "Sonny, you hush up. Wake yore pore ma. Yup, your pop was a real man, boy. Him an' me'd of brought in Drake Chalmers long afore this, if your pop hadn't of died in that quicksand. Don't worry, kid, I'll get Drake yet. He's bound to pick on my spread sooner or later."

From the corrals behind the ranchhouse came the low nicker of a pony.

Jeff started. His gun almost slid from his frozen fingers. That old man in there,

(Continued on page 100)

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A Correspondence Institution

(Continued from page 98)

the kid with the high-pitched voice, the horse in the shadows—he'd known them all before. They had been a part of his life, were a part of his life this minute.

For the old man was Jeff's father, the kid, his, Jeff's own kid! It all came back with a rush. Pressley, that was his name—Jeff Pressley. Hodd Pressley, his father. Little Sonny, his boy. Martha, Jeff's wife, wasn't well.

Jeff's eyes went hard in the gloom. Like clear crystal, he pictured how Rome Aiken had framed him. He recalled meeting Rome beside the quicksand, Rome looking funny, then something hard braining Jeff from the rear. That must have been Doc, the dirty pill-roller. The pair evidently had left Jeff's horse and hat by the quicksand, cooked up a story about the animal throwing him. Old Hodd had believed it. You couldn't drag quicksand for cinching evidence.

And now here was Jeff Pressley about to rob his own father under the guise of Drake Chalmers. Jeff knew it was useless to try and explain to the old man. That damnably clever scalpel of Doc Jules' had changed Jeff's face completely. Never in the world could Jeff convince Hodd Pressley that he wasn't the gunman Drake.

Rob his own father! Sweat broke out on Jeff's taut forehead. If he didn't rob Hodd, Rome and Doc would cook his goose. The law would string Jeff up.

Something hard pressed Jeff's back, a chill voice breathed in his ear.

"Drop that gun pronto, and turn around!"

Slowly, Jeff Pressley pivoted. In the uncertain light, he made out a towering, masked figure. The man's pinpoint eyes gleamed above the bandana about his nose and mouth. He held a heavy Colt .45 in his gaunt right hand.

"Stick up, huh?" he said softly.

(Continued on page 102)

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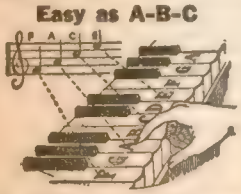

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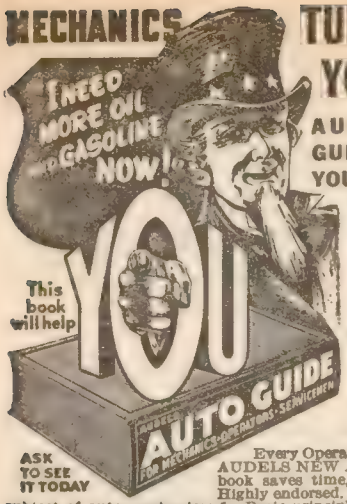

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(Continued from page 100)

"Brother, two can play at that. I happen to've got here first. Let's have a look at that map of yours."

Before Jeff could prevent it, the other had whipped up his free hand, snatched Jeff's mask from his face. The stranger prodded him out into the moonlight.

He gasped at what he saw.

Jeff's mouth twisted beneath his altered nose. "Yeah—Drake Chalmers. That's what *you* think. That's what everybody in town would think, once they'd spot me. Gunny, I don't give a damn what anybody thinks. It's what I'm gonna do about it that's got me loco. A weasel-brained medico and a skunk storeman did this to me. Knocked me out, made my face over to fit their hellish plans. I'm Jeff Pressley, not Drake Chalmers. Go ahead, laugh. But it's the truth. And lay off gun-whippin' that old man in there. He's my father. Him an' my kid—"

The masked one was breathing heavily. He didn't seem to be listening.

"Medico? Storeman?" he rasped. "Listen, brother, was the medico's name Jules? And the other gent—he couldn't be Aiken? *Rome* Aiken?"

Jeff Pressley nodded. What in hell did this gent know of them? "They pards of yours, stranger?" Jeff queried grimly.

The other returned Jeff's gun. "*Was* pards of mine. Aiken and Jules did me dirt, years past. They skipped. Swore I'd get square if it took the rest of my life. Where'd you say you left Aiken, Pressley? I hone to see that hombre."

♠ ♠ ♠

WITH Jeff leading the way, the two men reached the fringe of woods quickly. Not far from the spruce grove, the gunman grasped the rancher's arm.

(Continued on page 104)

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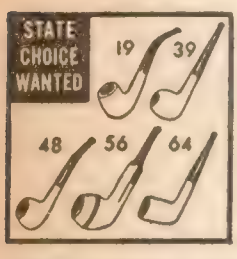

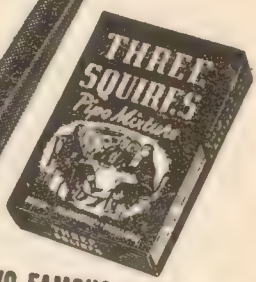

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(Continued from page 102)

"I'll handle this alone," he said, and strode forward.

Jeff moved closer to watch. He knew he was a fool to trust this total stranger. Hand on sixgun, Jeff peered at the grim scene unfolding before him.

"What's been keepin' you?" Rome Aiken was growling. "Say! You ain't Chalmers! You— What in hell!"

The stranger advanced mincingly. His right hand crooked like an eagle's talon above his holster.

"I'm an old pal of yours, Rome. A real old pal. Reckoned I'd settle a few scores. Yuh see, I'm—"

Aiken's flashing weapon spun from his swiftly moving draw. The gun that bellowed was the stranger's, and Rome lurched from his horse without a cry. He lay twitching on the crimsoned ferns.

The masked fellow grunted. "Quick, but not quick enough. Rome's brains always did beat his gunpull."

He turned to Jeff, now running from the trees. "We'll load the skunk on his horse and make for town. Step on it. We want to reach Doc's before he gets suspicious of the delay."

They rode in silence into Blue Bottle City. Jeff Pressley's head whirled with questions, but he choked them back resolutely. He didn't care who this gent was helping him, long as he continued the good work. Rome was gone now, and maybe they could get Doc. If they could just force Doc, before a bunch of townsmen, to confess what he'd done to Jeff—it was the only way anybody would know that Jeff wasn't Drake Chalmers. Jeff still couldn't see why the masked stranger had believed him, after spotting Jeff's altered features.

Doc Jules's office crouched among trees, a bit apart from the rest of the town, and Jeff Pressley, the gunman, and their grim burden didn't have any trouble approach-

ing undetected. Doc Jules himself was pawing through some papers on his desk as Jeff entered.

The little medico looked up, scowling. "About time you were getting back. I'd begun to wonder if—" He noted for the first time the masked man behind Jeff, carrying the lifeless Aiken. "Hell's bells! What's coming off here?"

The masked gunny forced Jules toward the operating table with his bared .45. "Get out your tools, sawbones," he said quietly, "and do as I say. Jeff, lie down on that table and take it easy. Doc here's gonna twist that face of yours back like it was at first. Step lively, Doc. I got the trigger itch kinda strong tonight."

"I'll see you in blazes!" Doc said, but moved for his bag, shaking.

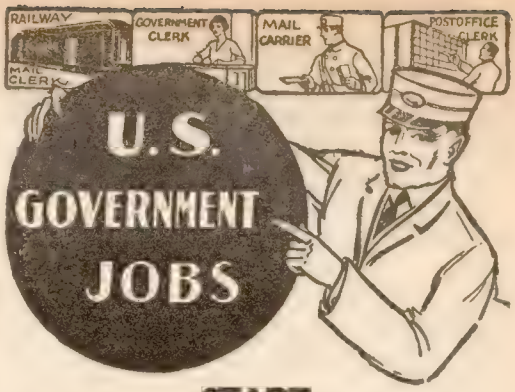
Thus for the second time in less than three months, Jeff Pressley went under the physician's knife. . . .

He came around gradually. His nose was sore, aching. He had bandages wrapped all over his face. But he could see and hear plainly.

Doc and his captor were still talking.

"For five years," the masked gent was saying, "I've lived to meet up with you again, Jules. I've rode the owlhoot, slept in jails not fit for a hog to wallow in. I've slugged gents for their pay, in order to buy grub for me an' my hoss. I've had posses on my tail day and night, just because you and Rome left me holdin' the bag in that bank robbery. Now I find you and Aiken framin' an innocent hombre into doin' your dirty work. This is trail's end for you, Doc. One of us'll leave this room, and it won't be—"

Even the terror-stricken can act inspiredly when cornered. Doc Jules' boot-toe speared the masked stranger's leg suddenly, causing the latter to double up in tight pain. The gunman's six-shooter barked, but the bullet sped harmlessly past the medico's shoulder.



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FROM beneath his left armpit, Doc Jules tugged out a gleaming derringer. "Trail's end," the little man snarled hysterically. "For *you!*"

The roar of his gun was blanketed by the shot from the operating table. Jeff Pressley, straining his hand to his hip, fired his own gun from his prone position. The effort cost him dearly. He had the satisfaction of seeing Doc Jules fold to the floor, derringer oozing from his relaxing fingers.

Jeff laid back on the table, panting.

The masked man came over.

"That's that," he chuckled. "Now it'll work out slick. I'll trade guns with Doc, remove his holster so it'll look like he shot Rome. You can tell the town them two got in an argument, and you hadda shoot Doc when he tried to get you for seein' him kill Rome."

Jeff sat up gingerly. "But you— Where you goin' now?" Jeff was thinking that this man had originally come to rob his father. Would he return to the completion of that plan?

The other didn't seem to notice the question.

"Thing for you to do," he went on easily, "is rest here a while, then notify the sheriff and get on back to your kid and pop. You sure was lucky I bumped into you when I did. You see, Jeff, Chalmers let it get around that he was dead, to get the law off his heels. Jules and Aiken pulled a boner when they made you up to look like him. Well, so long, brother. I gotta get out of here while I'm healthy."

Jeff Pressley had been feeling his nose, now slim and straight as ever beneath the bandages. He looked up.

"But, dammit, fella, hold on. Just who in hell are you?"

The gunman didn't remove his mask. Just gave a short laugh. "I'm Drake Chalmers," he said.

(Continued from page 88)

men. "I knowed all of 'em. Something fishy about this."

"I'll soon find out about it," barked Anse Collins. "Looks like the whole damn world has gone crazy. Wait here!"

Mark was already in the yard. Anse Collins caught up with him, and they entered the house together. Old Anse was boiling over. He roared at Bill Bowmer, wanting to know why the hell Bill hadn't come on to Dolman the night before, as he had sent word by Elly Yates for him to do. Then Anse saw Bill sitting by the fire with his arm in a sling.

"Keep yo' shirt on, Anse," said Bill. "Sit down here, and I'll tell you some things. Elly didn't bring me no message, because Dave Faulk murdered him." Then Bill went on and told the whole story, winding up with: "That young feller there is the only reason I'm alive."

"Him?" sneered Collins, looking at Mark, who was standing quietly watching the two old ranchmen. "Why, he's crazy as hell."

"I beg your pardon, Captain Collins," said Mark. "I have a letter for you. I was in too big a hurry to give it to you in town."

Collins looked at the letter, looked at Mark. Then: "Well, now I know someone's crazy. I did yell for rangers, but we need a hundred. Where's the rest of 'em?"

"It doesn't take many rangers, if they work hard," Mark said. "I'm the only one they sent, and the job is just about finished. I look enough like a horsethief so the thieves told me all I wanted to know. You don't have to clean up the thieves in this section. All you have to do is clean up your own organization. The main band of thieves is at Dave Faulk's ranch."

"All right," bellowed Collins. "If you know that, we'll go get them."

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"Not right now," Mark told him. "There is another job that must be done first. Dave's place was the hideout for stolen horses, but the brains of the gang is in town, and his name is Nate Roddy."

"No!" yelled Collins. "Nate Roddy is a member of our organization. He gives us plenty of information. Why, damn it, Nate is almost a preacher. I know you are crazy now."

"Shore he's crazy," chuckled Bill Bowmer. "Just like a fox. I thought he was crazy when he told me about Dave and Skinny, too. Tie to that chap, Anse, and you won't go wrong."

"Bill, I can't swallow stuff like that about Nate. Why he—"

"Just go back to town with me, and follow my directions," said Mark, "and I'll prove Roddy is crooked."

"All right," agreed Collins, "but I want you to get this. If you don't produce proof, you are goin' to pay for this, ranger or no ranger, hell or no hell. I haven't figured out yet how you got away from us in town, the way you did. You just said you looked like a horsethief, and damn my hide if that ain't so. Also, you know all of their tricks. If Bill says you are on the level, I'll trust you—a little. I won't take yo' gun, but I'll watch you. Maybe you are a ranger, but I seen a feller one time that had killed a ranger, taken the papers off'n him, and played ranger till he'd stole this section clean. Let's ride."

CHAPTER FOUR

Trial by Fire

BILL BOWMER watched from the window as they walked to the gate. Bill was a little ashamed of himself for having been so gullible. His judgment of men had been pretty faulty. Dave Faulk and Skinny Evans had been work-

ing him for months. He had passed dozens of C Brand horses on fake transfers that Skinny had issued. He felt pretty low about that.

Maybe Mark was a crook. If he was, he was in the hands of the wrong man now. What ever Bill's judgment of men might be, he knew that Anse Collins was on the level, and that he was the shrewdest man in the C Brand organization. If Mark was impersonating a ranger, he was sorry, for he liked the young fellow. If Anse Collins became too suspicious, he would simply hang Mark. . . .

"Now, young feller," growled Anse as they rode along, "here's where you explain some things. What made you pull a fool stunt like you pulled in Dolman?"

"I didn't have time to do anything else," Mark replied calmly. "I knew that Dave Faulk's cowhands were all thieves and killers. I knew that they were trying to kill Bill Bowmer, and that they would keep on until they got him. When I left Bowmer's last night, I was going to find help. I guessed the vigilantes was my best best bet, and that they'd be in Dolman."

"Oh, you did?" said Collins. "A man don't take the chance of being killed that you took, unless he is desperate."

"Oh, that wasn't much of a chance. You know that if a man hits another one with a six-shooter at sixty yards, when they are both standing still, it's an accident. If he hits him when they are both running, it's a miracle. You fellows were excited. I was more than sixty yards from you when you woke up, and I knew you couldn't get that close to me again."

"Huh. You was making a bet on mighty long odds," grunted Collins. "You better not try it again. I may as well tell you that if you can't prove anything on Nate Roddy—and I know you can't—you are going to hang on that big tree in Dolman!"

It was about noon, and Hunch Grimes

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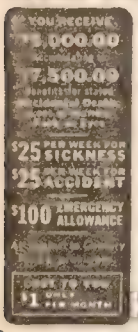

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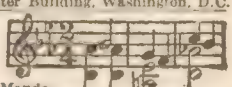

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was standing in the stable door. He had looked at those two bodies hanging on the old tree a hundred times, and each time he had looked up the slope to the south, to see if the vigilantes were coming back to town. It was about noon when he sighted them coming over the brow of the hill. A moment later he recognized Mark and that chestnut horse by the side of Anse Collins.

"I told that dang fool what would happen to him," muttered Hunch. "Nate Roddy and nobody else can talk him loose from it now."

Hunch put on as innocent a look as he could manage while he stood watching for the vigilantes to stream by with their prisoner and go on to the hanging tree. Then he changed color as they pulled up in front of the stable. The next moment Hunch was caught and bound.

"All right, Wendell," barked Collins. "Do your stuff. We haven't got long to wait."

"I shore hate to do this, Hunch," said Mark, "but you'll have to come clean. It's the only chance to save you and me from the tree."

"Wha—what do you mean?"

"Tell these fellows who's head of the gang here in town."

"Well, I—" Hunch hesitated. "All right, I'll talk if you say so. Ain't much to tell. Nate Roddy is head of the gang. Little while ago four of Dave Faulk's boys storm in here. If you don't believe me, you'll find them four fellers up in Nate's room. They are all fussed up about something, and—"

"That'll do," snapped Collins. "I think you are lying, but I'll soon find out. Come on, boys. Just leave Hunch hog-tied. If he has lied he goes to the tree. You are coming with us, Wendell—or whatever your name is."

Anse Collins didn't often make mistakes, but he made a bad one when he dis-

mounted his vigilantes in front of the undertaker's shop. The long, horse-face of Nate Roddy appeared at the window above for a moment. Then two guns flashed at each side of him, and two of the vigilantes went down.

"Inside, quick!" Collins roared.

The door of the shop was open, and Collins and his men sprang inside. The charm of looking like a horsethief was still working. The outlaws must have thought the vigilantes were taking Mark to hang him, and they were trying to shoot him loose from his troubles. He was the last one in the shop, yet was not touched.

There was a long work bench at one side of the shop, and the floor was deep with dry shavings. Old Anse Collins calmly struck a match and dropped it in the shavings.

"Out the back, fellows," ordered Collins, "and kill everything you see move. Them fellers will come down from there pretty quick."

Smoke and flame were pouring out of windows within a few minutes, as the vigilantes fanned out and watched the door. A can of varnish exploded with a thud, and added its bit to the flames. Men came racing through the flames and out of the door, and the vigilantes picked them off as they came.

"Don't shoot Nate," yelled Collins. "I want him whole."

He spoke too late. There was one fancy gunner in his outfit now who could hit a man at sixty yards, with both of them running, and that was Mark Wendell. He stuck a bullet in Nate's knee, just to keep him from going too fast. Old Anse Collins barged into the smoke, caught Nate by the collar and dragged him into the street. The other four were dead.

The remaining vigilantes ganged around them. "All right, Nate," Anse said. "It took some time, but we got you

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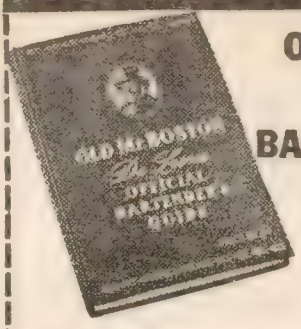

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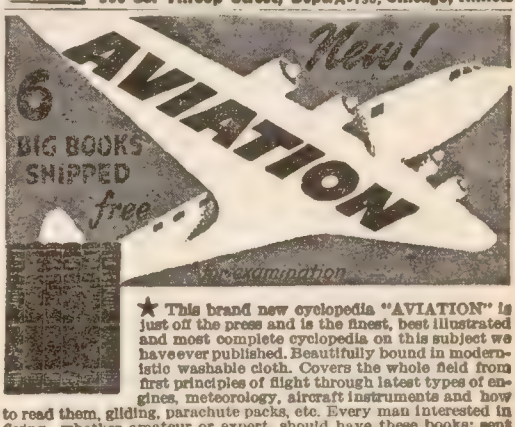

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at last. You are the head and brains of this Dolman thief ring."

"What are you going to do about it?" blustered Nate. "What do you mean by burning my property? I'll have the law on you for that. You can't prove a thing on me. I never stole a horse in my life."

"Maybe not," said Collins, "but you just killed a couple of my men. To the tree with him, boys."

There was wild disorder in the town now. The flames had spread to the saloon and dancehall next door. Everybody who could was getting out of town. The day of reckoning had come. They recalled that ray of light that had fallen on the hanging tree that morning, and panic seized them.

The vigilantes made short work of hanging the master outlaw, who had a face like an undertaker and a voice like a preacher. Then they set about finishing the job of destruction. The livery stable was on fire, when Mark dashed through the smoke and dragged Hunch Grimes out.

"What are you going to do with him?" asked Collins.

"Turn him loose, like I promised," Mark replied.

"Hell, no! Take him to the tree."

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"Not while I'm alive," Mark said. "I told him that if he would talk I'd see that he went free, and that goes as it lays."

Collins took one look at Mark's eyes, and gave in. Mark cut the thongs, put Hunch on a horse, and told him to ride. He didn't have to say it twice. Hunch wouldn't have heard him the second time. He was really going away from there.

It was almost sunset when a very tired band of vigilantes reached the Bowmer ranch. All the men except Collins and Mark Wendell went to the bunkhouse and cookshack. Those two went to the house.

"Well, Bill," Anse said, "I reckon I got to admit that this little hellion is a ranger. I don't know how he found it out, but he knowed all about everybody in this section of hell, and—I got to admit that he's got more nerve than ary man on earth, and can outshoot a whole army. After we clean the town up, we go to Dave Faulk's place. The thieves were gone, but we find a whole herd of stolen horses, waiting to cross the river."

"And that finishes my job in this section," Mark said calmly. "I reckon I can ride now."

"Not before morning," said Bill Bowmer, and Mark was grateful. He and his horse could use a good night's rest. And, too, there was another more important reason for delaying his leavetaking.

♦ ♦ ♦

THE big room across the entry from Bill Bowmer's room was the company room of the old ranchhouse. The wind had stiffened from the north, and it was turning cold. After supper, when Collins and his men had left for home, Clemmie took Mark to that room. A big fire roared in the fireplace and a lamp stood on a table.

They sat down before the fire and Mark rolled a smoke.

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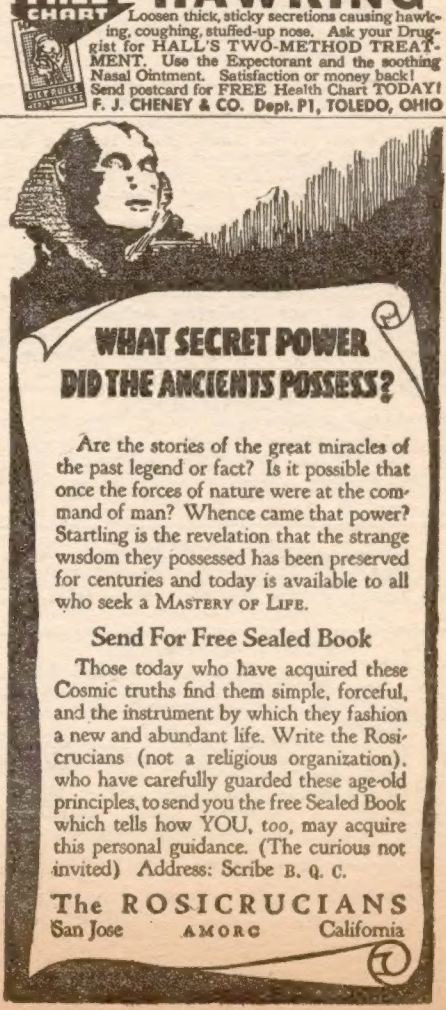

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"Miss Clemmie," he said, "there's something I been wanting to tell you ever since the first time I heard you speak, and saw how you acted in a bad jam. I want to tell you now, because it's two hundred miles to where I live, and I don't want to ride back here, unless—Well, I'm twenty-six years old, have never been married, never saw just the woman I wanted to marry until I saw you. Women who have the nerve you have, and at the same time are pretty and have good sense, are scarce. I know I look like a horse-thief, but I'm a ranger. How about it? Is there any use in my coming back?"

"No," she said. "But—there is no use in your going."

Bill Bowmer was sitting in an old rawhide-bottom chair by the fire. When Mark told him about Clemmie and him, the old rancher boomed, "Shore, that suits me. I got plenty of land and cattle. I'm shot up until I can't handle the outfit. You can make more money running this ranch than you could as a ranger, and have less chance of getting killed. Besides, you could eat regular."

There was little sentiment in Bill Bowmer's soul. To him, a woman was a chattel, and he had made a good trade with Clemmie. But such was not the case with Mark and Clemmie, as they went back to the privacy of the big company room, to lay plans for a happy life on the border. . . .

THE END

Classified Advertising

(Continued)

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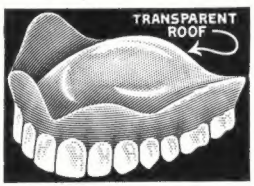

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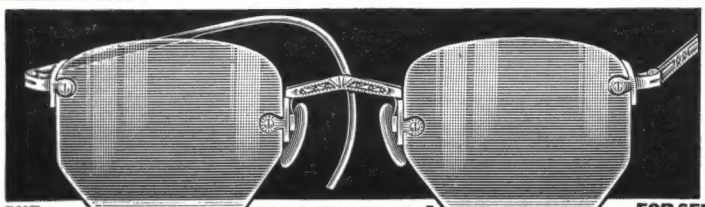

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